

Dear Friends,

As I reflect over this year and all that has taken place, I find myself giving thanks to our amazing God, which might seem strange to some considering the pandemic. But I give thanks because throughout this year I have known God with me, and I heard others testifying to experiencing the same. I give thanks because I have seen God moving His Church into action, along with communities and showing their true loving colours.

Amid the horrific and tragic news stories hope kept breaking through too, with heart-warming stories. Whilst I do give thanks, I also share the overwhelming sadness that this year has brought. I am mindful in my prayers of those who have lost loved ones. Especially this year with restrictions that have meant those bereaved couldn't celebrate the lives of those they love in the befitting ways, nor could the bereaved be hugged in many circumstances. In the times of heart-warming and heart-breaking events, God is near, and I pray we all keep placing ourselves in God's embrace to find comfort and joy.

In the Advent hymn 'Long ago, prophets knew' the final verse concludes with the words 'Saviour, do not tarry! Well, for those gathering in church buildings for acts of worship during this Christmas time, please also do not tarry, that is stay longer than intended. We are still living through a pandemic, therefore, let us keep loving others by taking our actions to protect each other seriously.

As we celebrate the breakthrough of a vaccine and witness good news stories in the media for a change. Let us also remember the opening words of verse four from Corinthians chapter thirteen, Love is patient. The tremendous effort to develop a vaccine is a great scientific feat and I give thanks to God for all the people involved in making this possible.

We know that getting to that point of population immunity will take a long-time and a concerted effort. We all have a part to play in that effort by remembering all that we have learnt about keeping safe, protecting others, and proceeding in a loving way. Whilst those considered at the highest risk will hopefully receive vaccinations first, it will not remove the dangers that are posed to those at a lower risk level, but nonetheless still at risk.

I hope that the followers of Christ called Methodists can be part of the number who model to our family, friends, and communities what patience looks like. That Love is patient. Another phrase which keeps coming to mind is 'all we can'. We are all aware of the restrictions and know what we cannot do, so instead, let us do 'all we can'. Everyone has gifts. Use your gifts to serve God as we continue to be Christians together and being church in a way that looks authentically different.

I want to take this opportunity to invite you to join me in thanking the staff team for all they have done this year. All the staff team have made every effort to continue serving God through the life of the Church by up-skilling, stepping out of comfort zones and much more. So, to the staff team, thank you for being a blessing to us all.

Finally, I would like to wish you and those you love a peace filled Christmastime. May we all receive the peace of the Lord as we open the door of our hearts once again and welcome Christ Jesus in.

Yours in Christ,

*Gareth*

Revd. Gareth Baron