

The Rectory, 1 Rectory Close, Fryerning Lane, Ingatestone,
CM40DB
01277352562 patrick.sherring@fryerningparishchurch.org.uk

Dear friends,

When I was shopping in Chelmsford recently, someone came up to me and said, "Patrick, I want to thank you for the Crib service on Christmas Eve at Ingatestone. It was out of this world. The only Church in the world with elastic walls!" He went on to say that they had all come as a family, his two sons, their wives and his grandchildren. I thanked him for his comment and said that it was so good that so many people in our villages acknowledge that you cannot really celebrate Christmas without coming to church. We had increased congregations this year over the period, with which everyone was delighted. Clergy friends have also said the same to me about their churches. Could it be that all that happened in 2005 has meant people have begun to consider afresh their lives and acknowledge that the faith and the Church might have some significant things to say?

Elsewhere in this magazine is published the talk I gave at the New Year's Eve service, which continues this point. The service, which was originally instigated for the millennium, had a congregation in three figures for the first time. Followed by stunning fireworks, this was a good way to "see out the old and see in the new".

Already this appears to be some time away. Have our good intentions for a new start already been overcome by the relentless busyness of life? We strive on and on, and for what? If you have been watching Celebrity Big Brother, one point is very clear. Celebrity status and all the trappings that go with it have not made these individuals happy people. As models of how to live and a status towards which to aspire, all they show is emptiness and bitterness. They are a good barometer of the times.

Can living the Christian life give us a life that is not defined by emptiness and bitterness? Can we have a sense of fulfilment and the love of God throughout all that life can throw at us? That is the question that Christians have to be prepared to answer, for these are the question that many people are asking. Jesus said

that we must not hide our lights. As Christians we have to be prepared to talk about these realities in our lives. We all know that this can be hard. However, if we pray to God for ways to make this possible, I guarantee that these situations will emerge.

In order to live in this open way, we need to acknowledge that we are on a continuous Christian journey. We need strength to undertake it, but there are ways we can grow. Through prayer is the first way. Prayer is our relationship with God. We would not feel we have a relationship with anyone if we only spoke with them very rarely. Relationships grow through communication. Church services, the coming together of God's people and all that should be part of those experiences, is also essential. It is also important to read the Bible and meditate on the teachings. The Bible is the foundation of our faith. The Bible Reading Group meets monthly to consider points raised through following a daily Bible reading course. It would be encouraging if more people took these notes and joined the group, or made it so we needed a second group. As Lent approaches, we have the ecumenical Lent course, this year on Tuesday evenings at the URC. These evenings are an excellent opportunity to come together with others and explore the big questions of life. This year the title is 'Where is God...?' The five sessions will explore this in relation to our search for happiness, when facing suffering, when we make decisions, when we contemplate death, when we try to make sense of life. Together with the course booklet, these sessions will provide all those who attend with much to think about and reflect upon.

I do hope that as we move forward into 2006, we can have "seen out the old and seen in the new". We can have looked afresh at our lives and want to move forward in new ways. People sometimes say, "I cannot see the purpose of the church". This is usually a statement that reflects more about their lives than the effectiveness of the church. But the church cannot be complacent. I trust that at Ingatestone and Fryerning we are not complacent and that we are always searching to seek God's will for us individually and collectively. I pray that you seek ways to deepen your understanding of life and that you look to the church for help. Yours in Christ, *Patrick*