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Dear friends,

The election of Barak Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States has been called, "The triumph of Hope". At a recent assembly at the Church School I showed his picture to the children and asked who he was. They all knew. I then asked why people thought he was an important person. An eight year old replied, "Because he is the first black person to become President". I had shown them a picture of him as a teenager in Hawaii and asked the question, "When he was that age, would anyone have thought he could become the President?" All the children agreed that no-one would have thought he could do that. I then asked if he would have thought he could do it himself? Again, they all thought no. That is why he personifies the American dream and why his inspiration is important for everyone, regardless of whether we agree with his politics and actions. His story is one about human potential and achievement. I quoted to the children his words, "God is always with us in our lives and this gives us hope".

The reality of God's presence with us through all that life can sometimes appear to throw at us, is the reality of the Christian experience. Over the years here in the village I have known many people to who apparently unjust and unexplainable things happen. One of the saddest phone calls I ever had was with someone who had been diagnosed with cancer. I said to him that we would pray for him in church. His reply was, "Don't bother, what is the point?" The reality was that he had fought off cancer on three separate occasions. The fourth time was to be his last battle. He could not see that God had been there with him, helping to support him and his family through all of these battles. Yet of course, that is exactly the way God operates. One of the people confirmed last year said to me recently, "I see God's help in all the kind people around us." Jesus said after his resurrection that he needed to return to his Father so that the Spirit could come and then more could be done in his name than he could do himself. This is a remarkable reality. When we are

showing love and compassion to others we are showing them the love of God. The old Sunday School song, "Jesus hands are my hands" has much truth to teach to us all. For this is not just true of when we are deliberately helping someone; with God's help it can become integral to the way we act all the time. Everyone is a child of God, even the person cold calling on the phone to sell you double glazing!

Quite a number of people in our congregations have been reading an amazing book called *The Shack*. This book, which the author originally did not expect to be able to publish, tackles head-on the question of why do really awful things happen to good and innocent people. It is a novel and the author uses his imagination and encourages us to use ours to focus on this question which is fundamental to understanding human life. If you are looking for a good read during Lent, then I recommend this book. Many people in the church who have read it have been unable to put down once they have started.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity back in January was again a great source of strength to those who were able to attend the services. It is a great witness to our community that all our member churches see themselves as complimentary to each other and in no way in competition. This is expressed strongly in the Walk of Witness on Good Friday and the New Year's Eve service. Last year, designated as Hope 08, we also worked together to run a Holiday Club at the Church School. Perhaps our strongest witness together is our Lent Courses, this year run on Thursday evenings at the URC at 8 p.m. beginning on March 5<sup>th</sup>. These evenings, using the excellent York Courses, have an audio input, followed by discussion in groups using the course booklet. These have been popular with regular attendees over the years. It would be good to see some of our many younger and new people attending. Last year the attendances at Ingatestone grew an average of 8%. There has been a consistent pattern of growth over the last eight years, which has been very encouraging. The world needs to hear messages of Hope. Barak Obama victory is seen by many as, "The triumph of Hope". That phrase could also sum up the Christian message.

*Yours in Christ, Patrick*