



Mountain and Sea

A periodic newsletter of the Anglican Parish of Caloundra-
Glasshouse Country

St Andrew's Caloundra
Mary McKillop Centre Beerwah
St Thomas' Mooloolah

Issue 8 3 December 2021

Welcome to our new parish newsletter. This publication has come about because of revisions to our parish Pew Bulletin. We intend and hope to publish "Mountain and Sea" fortnightly, and it will comprise information about events and life within the parish, as well as articles of a theological or informative nature, and some more light-hearted material. We hope that you enjoy it, and will find it both instructive and diverting. Please direct any comments or complaints to the locum priest, Fr Michael.

This is the last edition of "Mountain and Sea" that I will be producing. The Communications Committee of the Parish Council will be taking over and I commend their efforts to you.

Forthcoming Events

- Saturday 4 December
- "Mooloolah Markets", Mooloolah Hall
10AM
 - "Hard of Hearing" Training and
information session, 2PM St Andrew's
- Saturday 11 December "Taizé" service at St Andrew's, 6 PM
- Sunday 19 December "Lessons and Carols" at St Andrew's,
3PM
- 7-12 January 2022 The CMS Summer School at Mt Tamborine.
- Christmas Services
- Friday 24 December (Christmas Eve)-
5.00PM St Andrews, Family service and
Eucharist
- 7.00PM St Thomas', Mooloolah
- 10.30PM St Andrew's, Carols
- 11.00PM Eucharist
- 8.00AM Eucharist
- 9.00AM Mary McKillop Centre Beerwah,
Eucharist



"I'm sorry, Mr Scrimjaw,
there's more to being a bishop
than just having your own
hat...."

I came across this article some years ago and have have found it very helpful each year as I think about preparing my various Christmas sermons, although I don't necessarily agree with all of its propositions. I hope might find it interesting, challenging and instructive as well.

“Five Common Errors to Drop from your Christmas Sermon”

Pastors, preachers, and Bible teachers: Have you thought about your Christmas sermon or lesson yet? If you want to help people celebrate Christmas this year (and every year) in keeping with established facts – not later legends, traditions, or popular imaginations – start by avoiding these common mistakes.

1. Don't add details that aren't in the text.

This might seem obvious but bears repeating because it happens so often. The massive annual proliferation of Christmas cards, nativity scenes, and TV specials perpetuates these added details and gives the impression that they are facts.

The infancy narratives in the Gospels lack many of the details that have been fabricated in subsequent centuries. For example, they don't tell us about the nature of the stable (cave, open-air, wood, etc.); whether there even *was* a stable; whether or not there were animals nearby; or the number of wise men. These *magoi* (not kings and not necessarily three in number) almost certainly didn't arrive on the night of the birth as most manger scenes depict. And a star wouldn't have been suspended right above the roofline. With no mention of a stable, the manger could have been in the open air, in an animal pen near the house, in a small cave, or in the area of a house used for animals.

The texts don't mention Mary and/or Joseph riding on a donkey. It is equally plausible – if not more so – that they walked the entire way from Nazareth to Bethlehem (70–80 miles; at least 3 days of steady walking). The idea of Mary riding a donkey stems from a second-century apocryphal work (*Protoevangelium of James*, chap. 17). Actually, it wouldn't have been

unreasonable for a pregnant teenager in antiquity with an active lifestyle to walk such a journey.

Despite what we see in some Christmas pageants, there is no mention of an innkeeper (whether mean and coldhearted or regretful for the lack of space available); Luke simply mentions that there was no room in the *kataluma* (Luke 2:7). The *kataluma* was not a formal professional inn with an innkeeper but could point to either a public covered shelter (as in the Greek translation of Ex. 4:24) or to the guest room in a personal home (as in Luke 22:11).

It is important for us to stick with established facts when preaching and teaching. There is, of course, nothing wrong with the use of historical imagination. But it is important to maintain a clear distinction between what we actually know happened and imaginative reconstructions of how events might have taken place. Christianity is rooted in historical *fact*. This is as true for Jesus' birth as it is true for the crucifixion and resurrection.

2. Don't supply spiritual explanations for cultural practices to make them sound biblical.

We love to find – or even invent – spiritual reasons for various cultural practices related to Christmas. For example, we give gifts to one other to remind ourselves of God's great gift of Jesus to the world or of the gifts of the wise men to Jesus. That may sound nice, but is it biblical? Or do we really give gifts because that's what our parents did and what everyone else we know does (except the Jehovah's Witnesses, diehard secularists, and some religious purists)? What kind of parent would you be if you didn't give your child a Christmas present (or, in many cases, a whole roomful of them)? Or, just imagine, if you didn't celebrate Christmas at all (like the Puritans)? Very little is intrinsically spiritual or biblical about these kinds of expectations. They're almost entirely cultural. That doesn't make them necessarily wrong, but we shouldn't invent biblical rationales to justify them.

Examples abound. What does the decoration of an evergreen tree have to do with Jesus' coming to earth to rescue God's creation? We may tell ourselves it's a symbol of everlasting life because it's evergreen but is that really the reason to set up a Christmas tree each year? Similarly, we may

point to candles as a symbol of Jesus being the light of the world, holly as a symbol of the crown of thorns that was placed upon Jesus' head, the colour red as a symbol of Jesus' blood shed on the cross, the yule log as a symbol of the cross, mistletoe as a symbol of reconciliation, and bells as a symbol for ringing out the good news. Even if some of these associations and symbols are ancient, they don't explain why we should necessarily incorporate them in our Christmas celebrations today. If we're honest, we have to admit that we celebrate Christmas the way we do primarily because of our own cultural traditions, even though there's little real connection between these traditions and the biblical accounts of Jesus' actual coming to this earth as a baby.

The danger of infusing spiritual rationales into cultural practices is also seen in some of the Christmas songs we sing at church during the month of December. The most flagrant violation might be "O Christmas Tree." You have to search hard through the stanzas of this hymn to find anything related to Jesus. We should be uncomfortable singing this carol in a gathered group of Christians because it's basically a song paying homage to a tree. Just because the song has been culturally or traditionally associated with Christmas doesn't mean we should incorporate it into our Christian Christmas celebrations.

The main danger here is that we present cultural practices as if they carry biblical weight or authority. Obscuring the line between cultural practice and biblical teaching is not only unhelpful and confusing, but also potentially harmful to our faith. When we no longer distinguish what's biblical from what's cultural, we run the risk of accepting and propagating syncretistic, hodgepodge ideas that have no biblical basis. Our faith is no longer based in truth but, at least in part, on myths and legends. There is no need, of course, to abandon all these cultural practices in our family celebrations. We should simply maintain and communicate a clear distinction between the aspects of our Christmas celebration that are inherited from the culture and those that are clearly grounded in Scripture.

3. Don't be embarrassed by the Jewishness of passages related to Jesus' coming.

The first chapter of Luke includes two lengthy hymns that have traditionally been called the *Magnificat* (Mary's song in Luke 1:46-56) and

the *Benedictus* (Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-79). The titles come from the first word of these hymns in Latin. These passages – or at least parts of them – are at times neglected because they are rather lengthy and express Jewish hopes in God's salvation without a clear indication of what that salvation would look like. This deliverance, as we know it in retrospect, comes in the form of Jesus' death and resurrection, the expansion of the gospel beyond Israel to the Gentiles, and Jesus' return at the end of time. The *Magnificat* celebrates how God, through Mary's child, will restore and help Israel while opposing her enemies and oppressors. The *Benedictus* describes John the Baptist's role in relation to Jesus, the main figure in the fulfillment of God's plan to restore Israel. The hymn praises God's actions of visiting and redeeming his people by raising up the Davidic Messiah to deliver his people, all in fulfillment of his promises to Abraham and to his people through the Old Testament prophets. This deliverance will enable God's people to serve God without fear and in righteousness forever. Perhaps these hymns are at times neglected in our Christmas sermons because they're not "Christian" enough. This neglect, however, comes at a serious loss. Both hymns describe the salvation that will result from Jesus' coming to earth. During his first coming, he decisively dealt with his people's sin, thus fulfilling passages such as Micah 7:18-20. We're still waiting for his second coming, when he will set things right in every way – politically, economically, socially, and spiritually – once and for all. We are still waiting for the full and final fulfillment of the declarations made in the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus*. Both hymns are also powerful examples of how to praise God by focusing both on his attributes – his power, holiness, and mercy – and his actions in fulfilling his ancient promises to his people in and through the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

The Christian faith is rooted inextricably and inexorably in the Jewish faith. This is why even Luke, a Gentile, presents Jesus' coming in terms of Old Testament fulfillment (Luke 1:1). Like Matthew, who wrote his Gospel primarily to Jews, Luke presents Jesus' coming in a thoroughly Jewish cast. If we fail to see our Christian faith rooted in God's dealings with his people Israel long ago, it will likely remain shallow and leave us with a truncated gospel and canon, not to mention an inadequate understanding of who Jesus is and why he came.

4. Don't be swayed by dubious challenges to the biblical witness to Jesus' birth.

Both birth narratives in Scripture are replete with manifestations of supernatural events surrounding the Virgin Birth: angelic appearances, dreams, visions, prophecies made regarding Jesus, Elizabeth conceiving past the age of childbearing, Zechariah losing his speech, the circumstances surrounding the naming of both John and Jesus, the relationship between the two births, and so on. Matthew, for example, goes out of his way to make clear that Mary was Jesus' mother, but that Joseph was not his real father. After a long string of references to men "fathering" a son, Matthew concludes his genealogy with reference to "Joseph the husband of *Mary, of whom Jesus was born*, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16, italics added), indicating that Joseph was *not* Jesus' real father. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb.

So let's not be intimidated by critical objections to the Virgin Birth or other supernatural aspects of the Christmas story. When you read about authors such as Reza Aslan claiming that stories about Jesus' birth and childhood are "conspicuously absent" from the earliest New Testament writings – such as Paul's letters and Mark's Gospel – and that the early Christians filled in the gaps to align Jesus's life with various Old Testament prophecies, including those related to his birth, don't be alarmed. According to Aslan, the early Christians concocted the myth of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem in order "to get Jesus's parents to Bethlehem so he could be born in the same city as David." Others, such as Andrew Lincoln, deny the historicity of the Virgin Birth on similar grounds. We can't respond in detail here, though we've done so elsewhere. In short, these kinds of arguments reflect misguided attempts to drain the biblical birth narratives of their transcendent elements by using critical reasoning in order to reinterpret supernatural occurrences and to rewrite the narratives in purely naturalistic terms.

On the one hand, as already mentioned, let's be careful ourselves not to add extraneous details – though driven by tradition, not critical reasoning. Let's be adamant in defending the reliability of the biblical witness to the supernatural nature of Jesus' birth, which was unlike any other in human history. The Bible is unequivocal, and careful historical research certainly allows for the fact that it took a miracle – in fact, a whole string of miracles – to save us. That is nothing to be embarrassed or intimidated about.

5. Don't get bogged down in trivia and miss the true significance of Jesus' birth.

Scholars continue to debate questions such as the year of Jesus's birth, and whether or not Jesus was born on December 25. They debate the historicity of Quirinius's census, the year of Herod the Great's death, the phenomena surrounding Jesus' birth – the star of Bethlehem – and a host of related chronological and other issues. They also debate the possible pagan origins of Christmas, such as whether it provided a functional substitute for the Roman Saturnalia, and, as mentioned, the emergence of various other traditions associated with our celebration of Christmas. All of these are interesting questions worth exploring, but don't dwell unduly on such peripheral issues. Instead, focus on the central message of Jesus' first coming, on the biblical story of the Incarnation.

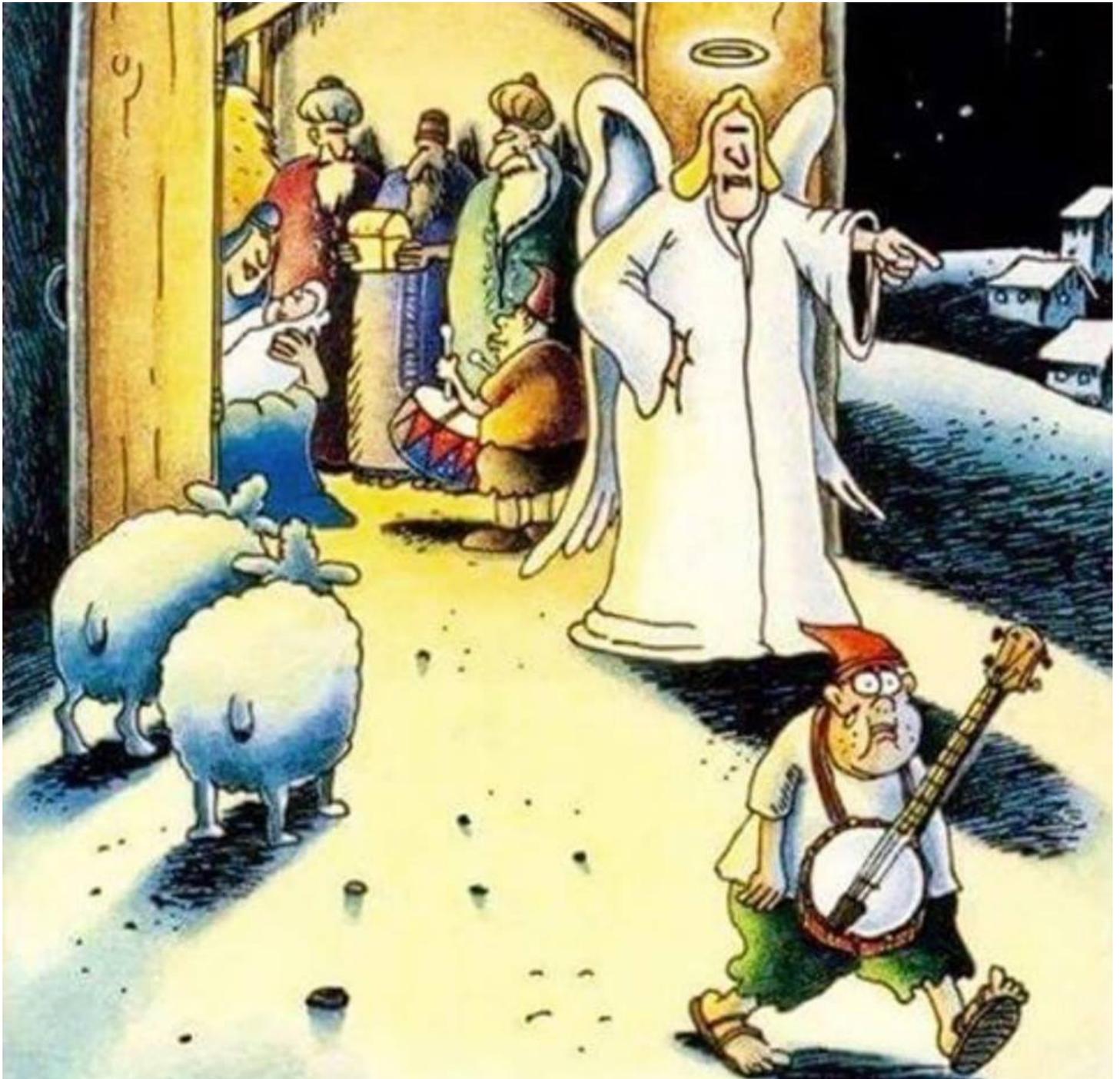
Who was Jesus, and why did he come? John's Gospel roots Jesus' origins in eternity past, as the Word who was in the beginning with God and was himself the agent of creation. According to John, in Jesus, God visited the world he had made, but his own did not receive him (1:11). How tragic! How inexcusable! That Word, John tells us, became flesh in Jesus, or, as John puts it, "pitched his tent" among us (1:14). In his three and a half years of ministry, Jesus trained the twelve disciples and others to carry on his mission, to take the gospel of salvation to the ends of the earth. Then, he died for us on the cross to reconcile us to God. Our broken relationship with God was mended. Those who trust in him enjoy deep spiritual fulfillment and continual connection with him already in the here and now and will do so for all eternity.

That's worth celebrating, at Christmas and throughout the year, in joyful song and in a life dedicated to the glory of God in the highest of which the angels sang that starry night over two millennia ago.

Related Reading: [Andreas J. Köstenberger's and Justin Taylor's article "Five Errors to Drop From Your Easter Sermon."](#)

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Badhoevedorp, The Netherlands. They co-authored The First Days of Jesus: The Story of the Incarnation (Crossway, 2015).



It's interesting to ponder the events of the Christmas story and to reflect on all that could have gone wrong or moved in a different direction. In fact, it's interesting to wonder what kind of pondering the characters did in our Gospel accounts of the Nativity. Here are some imaginary conjectures of what they might have thought about the events that unfolded around them.

Augustus the Emperor

I was born Gaius, but you know me as Caesar Augustus, emperor of the Romans. I was orphaned at age four and raised by my grandmother. Julius Caesar adopted me because he had no heir and I succeeded him as emperor. Rulers always have many problems with which to deal. Among my problems were declining populations and declining numbers of families. Often this resulted from the numbers of soldiers who represented Rome in foreign countries and didn't return to father children. Additionally, the costs for maintaining my armies were huge and taxation was the only way I could support them. I pondered these issues a great deal and decided that by taking a periodic population census I could determine whether the population was growing or declining. I could also raise money to support my armies by taxing the people at a census. It was a huge undertaking to conduct this census and taxation throughout the empire. Some of it was done in large cities like Antioch and some of it was done in small villages like Bethlehem. Now and again there were uprisings from people who objected to the process. What was I to do, however? I was the emperor and after pondering the issues from all sides, I decided this approach was in the best interests of the empire. Was I right?

Joseph of Nazareth

I am Joseph of Nazareth and according to my family tradition, I am descended from the line of King David whose family seat was in Bethlehem. Because the emperor decided to have everyone return to his or her family seat for a census, I had to travel to Bethlehem. My problem was that I was engaged and my wife to be was pregnant. This was not my child and this caused great consternation for me. What was I to do? If I refused to acknowledge her child as mine and left her behind in Nazareth, she might be stoned to death. If I took Mary along, I was acknowledging that her child was my child, a deceit I could not overcome. I pondered this matter for

many days and even had a dream about it to give me some guidance. Finally, I decided that my love for Mary would overcome any problems involved and we would work this out together. So we left for Bethlehem and there were a lot of quiet moments on the journey as we attempted to re-establish trust and plan a future for us and for our child. Was I right?

Jehoiachim the shepherd

I am Jehoiachim, a shepherd from a field near Bethlehem. We watched our flocks at night to protect them from wild animals. It was also a rainy time of the year when the grass grew and sheep pastured as much as they wanted. Sometimes they stayed in one area for a while, but typically they just kept moving, munching grass as they went. We kept a fire to keep us warm on cold nights, and there was a stone wall in which we could enclose the sheep if we needed to contain them for a time. Sometimes, we dozed by the fire and dreamed of better lives. Sometimes the dreams were grandiose and opened up the heavens to us as we lay there. One night, strange as it may seem, all of us were arrested by a band of heavenly messengers who told us that a child to be born in Bethlehem was to be the Messiah. We checked with each other to see if we were dreaming or if we had all heard the same thing. Discovering that we had all experienced this, we pondered the matter, trying to decide what to do. What should we do? We decided we needed to go to Bethlehem to check this out. Were we right?

Mary of Nazareth

I am Mary of Nazareth and came with my husband, Joseph, to Bethlehem. It was very hard for him to decide what to do with and for me and I want to assure you that he is the most loving husband there ever was. I could only tell him that the child being born to me was promised in a dream I had and that he should have no fear. Joseph himself had a similar dream, which assured him that his defending and protecting me was part of the love that was calling him. So we travelled along dirt roads for several weeks and finally came to the village of our ancestors, Bethlehem. It was a difficult time for both of us, but many other travellers found themselves in the same straits. When we finally arrived, there were no accommodations to be found so we took refuge in a cave where someone kept livestock. There in the middle of the night, I gave birth to my son and, as was the custom, wrapped him tightly in cloth to contain his arms and legs. In that same night, some shepherds came into the cave, saying they had received news of

this birth from a heavenly messenger, and they had come to learn what they could. I pondered such thoughts for a long time. What could this possibly mean? Who were these shepherds and how could they have learned about this birth? And who really was this child and what did his birth mean to me and to others as well? Were we right to be here?

Michael of Brisbane, 2021

I am Michael of Brisbane and I have heard this story many times and have celebrated the birth in song and pageantry. Each time I celebrate it, I ask myself whether there is more here than I have grasped before and how the meaning of this story can impact me this time as never before. I ponder this over and over again.

Each year I ask myself when and how I will more completely grasp that God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life (John. 3:16). Sometimes in a powerful organ prelude or in a beloved hymn like "Once in David's Royal City" or in a concert of carols I wait for the moment to come. I ponder the words and the message as did Mary and Joseph and the shepherds.

And I ask myself, as surely you do as well, what has to happen for this message about grace and love to claim me more fully-to empower me more genuinely.

I even ask myself what would have happened to the story and in the story if Caesar or Joseph or the shepherds or Mary had made different decisions-had moved in a different direction. I ponder such things looking for answers.

The reflections aren't always clear, and in some years they are more robust than in others.

However, I have come to cherish the pondering, the waiting and the wondering, the longing and the hope. I know that in God's own good time the fullness will touch me as it perhaps once touched Mary or the shepherds. I know that it may touch me in unexpected ways and in unexpected times. For the present, however, I'm thankful for the pondering, the creative quest for glory in heaven and peace on earth which comes in its own way and time.

On this day, Christmas 2021, I wait with all of you for the fullness of God's great love to dawn in us as we seek to apply this message in our time and place.

On this Christmas Day let's be waiting.

Fr Michael

Dear people of the Anglican Parish of Caloundra Glasshouse Country,

Thank-you so much for allowing me to minister as your locum priest for this last six months. In the brief time that I have been here, I have made many new friends and been given opportunities to share in your lives and journeys of faith. As we all seek to live lives that honour God, present the incarnated Jesus to the World and are guided by the Holy Spirit, may I wish you every blessing in your future endeavours.

I understand that it has not been and may not immediately become an easy or straightforward time in the collected life of the church you represent variously in Mooloolah, Beerwah and Caloundra, but please be assured of my prayers and best wishes as you continue to discern what God has in mind for you.

Thanks also to the wardens, Parish Council, the honorary clergy, all who assist with the liturgy and in the office who have made my time here so memorable.

Wishing you a joyous Christmas celebration and every blessing in your ongoing ministry,

Pax et bonum,

Fr Michael

