



outlook

Newsletter of **Pond Square Chapel** | Highgate United Reformed Church | **March - June 2024**



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•Minister's Reflection

Over the past number of church magazines, we have been journeying through the art of Vincent Van Gogh and encountered not only an amazing artist but also a person who was seeking to understand, articulate and grapple with what faith meant personally for him.

In this edition of the magazine, we explore one of Van Gogh's major oil paintings from his Dutch period, *Open Bible* (1885). The painting shows that while his attitude toward conventional religion had changed (moving from devout believer to critical conversation partner), he still maintained both a respect for the Bible and, more importantly, an appreciation of Christ the Redeemer. 'Open Bible' depicts a large gold-leafed family Bible open to Isaiah 53, a small tattered copy of a French realist novel, Emile Zola's *Joie de Vivre* (Joy of Life) and a snuffed-out candle in the background.

With this combination of motifs, Van Gogh recalls the Dutch "Vanitas" tradition of the 17th century, which emphasised the transitory nature of human existence. As such, it may have been a tribute to Van Gogh's father, who died a few months before. Virtually all art historians who have critiqued this painting see it as a rejection of religion (particularly the Bible) for the modern, joyous lifestyle of 19th-century France.

But Van Gogh continued to study the Bible even after abandoning his ministerial calling. He still held the Bible in high esteem, writing in a letter to his brother Theo in 1883 in which he states "I told father that in the Bible itself maxims can be found by which we may test our convictions to see whether they are reasonable and just."

His interest was in the Bible's application to modern life continuing, "Now take Michelet and Beecher Stowe, they don't tell you the Gospel is no longer of any value, but they show how it may be applied in our time, in this our life, by you and me, for instance." Furthermore, Paul Gauguin, who lived with Van Gogh in Arles from October through December 1888, tells us that "his Dutch brain was afire with the Bible." In addition, the literal interpretation of the "joy of life" ignores the irony of Zola's title, since the hero in *Joie de Vivre*, Pauline, perseveres through great suffering (and little joy) as a kind of Christ-figure, much like the hero in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean.

The continuity between the image of the Bible in the painting and the image of the French novel thus lies in its emphasis on the Christ-figure even more

apparent when one considers the subject of the biblical passage depicted in the painting. Although the exact verses are not decipherable, van Gogh was well acquainted with Isaiah 53:3-5, which foretells the suffering of Christ as the sacrificial lamb. During his preparation for ministry, Van Gogh admired Christ's humility as a common labourer and "man of sorrows" whose life he tried to imitate.

Therefore, for Van Gogh and us, Jesus Christ is the Master who can comfort and strengthen a person, even when life is hard, because he is the great man of sorrows who knows our ills.

•Children's Nativity Play

On the 17th of December 2023, a delightful nativity play unfolded, bringing joy to the audience. It told the story of a particularly grumpy innkeeper as the main character, played by Evelyn.

Many different guests arrived at his inn, including Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, and the Kings. All these visitors kept on waking the innkeeper up, making him slightly angry. However, in the end he realised that the baby born in his stable held a special significance.



The performance skillfully balanced moments of humour, irritation, and revelation, engaging the audience throughout.

The climax revealed the innate goodness within the initially irate innkeeper, fostering a heartwarming conclusion that resonated with the spirit of the season.

The colourful costumes only added to the spirit of the play.

In essence, the nativity play of 2023 was not merely good; it was a multifaceted and memorable portrayal of the timeless Christmas story.

Jessica Choo

• Organ Recital ‘Glenorchy’

For many years, Glenorchy URC in Exmouth has been the venue for Wednesday lunchtime concerts. It's an excellent enterprise by the church; the concerts are freely given and free to attend, so if you have already partaken of the free tea, coffee and biscuits provided before the show, you'll feel suitably guilty ignoring the collection plate on exit. Much time and effort and love goes into the maintenance of these concerts and they have a faithful following. There's a goodly variety on offer throughout the year - pianists, organists, vocal ensembles, clarinetists, harpists, guitarists have all featured – and on Wednesday 17th January Dr Robert Manning gave a recital on the Glenorchy organ.

Robert is a Devon man, so felt entirely at home with the appreciative audience, whom he addressed before the recital started. It's always helpful to have some idea of time or place where musical pieces are performed and Robert's programme of Wesley, Bach and Manning (yes, the very same!) related to Wesley's family connection with Exeter Cathedral and indeed with a church in Exmouth, J.S. Bach's brief to provide music for every Sunday of the year, and Robert's own tribute to the late Dr Brian Collins.

The three Wesley pieces were delightful, excellently suited to the Glenorchy organ and artfully articulated by Dr Manning. I was particularly delighted and enlightened by the Gavotte, a piece that immediately took me back to Saturday weddings as a choir-boy (2/6 a go in the 1960's) when our organist – a John Keble, no less - regularly played it during The Signing of the Register. After all these years I now know who wrote it.

Bach intended to produce 164 chorale preludes in his *Orgelbüchlein* but other commitments must have got in the way. With a well-chosen selection from the 46 that Bach eventually published, Robert took us through the Church's year, from Advent to Whitsun, with well-contrasted and clear registrations. These preludes took the Glenorchy organ to its limits, but not beyond, although this wasn't the first time I've heard its trombone stop a-shakin' and a-rattlin'; accomplished organists such as Robert ought to be warned. And on a brilliant final and gracious note, Robert gave us his own chorale prelude on Nun Danket Alle Gott. Dedicated to Dr Brian Collins, this was a clever conjunction of a well-whistled motif, The Dance of the Cuckoos, which always introduced Laurel & Hardy - you know how it goes – and the grand old hymn tune “Now thank we all our God”. Just to make sure the show ended on smiles and chuckles, Robert played the counter theme on the cheekiest stop he could find before launching into his finale. Altogether an excellent lunch-time performance and exquisitely timed for Dr Manning's well-deserved lunch. He's been immediately booked again for next year.

Colin Rivett

• Organ Repair

Pond Square Chapel Organ

For well over 30 years now, our organ has been maintained by the firm of B.C. Shepherd & Sons, whose workshops are in Edgware.

The organ has an interesting history. At a time when our church simply needed an organ, its predecessor having succumbed to dry rot and other ailments, church member Christopher Driver heard of an organ languishing in a barn in Staffordshire, not far from Tamworth. How it got there, and where it came from, is not known, but the farmer wanted the space and was prepared to accept £750. Driver and fellow church member Anthony Green the artist, acting unilaterally together with organ enthusiast Guy Oldham, hired a van and brought the organ in bits to Pond Square Chapel.

Oldham reassembled it; and on 19 May 1984 (should we mark the 40th anniversary of this event?),

Christopher Driver, a talented musi-

cian, moved unannounced for the last hymn from the piano to “christen” the organ with the hymn “Lo, he comes with clouds descending”.

The instrument was later completely rebuilt by the Shepherds in Autumn 1992. Our organ - which I understand was built by the firm of J.W. Walker & Sons - dates from the 1850s, making it exactly contemporary with our building. Some modifications were made to it a couple of decades later, but so far as I know these did not alter its tone in any way.)

The instrument has two manuals and pedals, with ten speaking stops; its action is ‘tracker’ (or ‘mechanical’), giving the player greater control than on an organ where the connection between keys and pipes is made via electronic pulses.



It has a bright, sweet tone; it is unsuitable for big 'romantic' music such as Widor's 'Toccata', but excellent for baroque music - e.g. Purcell, Bach and Handel - and ideal for the smaller-scale works of Samuel Sebastian Wesley and other Victorian composers. To accompany our services (its main task) it is, likewise, ideal.

A former Open University colleague of mine, on hearing and playing it, said to me: "Robert - this organ is a gem. You should be praising it from the rooftops!" We are fortunate beyond measure that the maverick foresight of Messrs Driver and Green has enabled us to enjoy such a splendid instrument. And we have been equally fortunate in having had the Shepherd brothers as our organ builders and maintainers for the best part of four decades now. They take a real delight and personal interest in all the organs in their care.

They have just fitted new felts underneath the pedals - reducing the sound of 'clatter' when the pedals are played - and made other improvements and refurbishments which mean that the organ is even more of a pleasure to play than it was before. Unquestionably we are blest with our organ, and with the people who so lovingly maintain it.

Robert Manning

RESOLUTIONS

IS THERE A MESSAGE I SHOULD BRING
FROM THE OLD YEAR TO THE NEW.

IN THE GLOW OF CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS.
ARE WE CELEBRATING A MID WINTER FESTIVAL?

OR THE LIGHT AND LIFE OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS.
A MESSAGE OF PEACE AND LOVE FOR ALL.

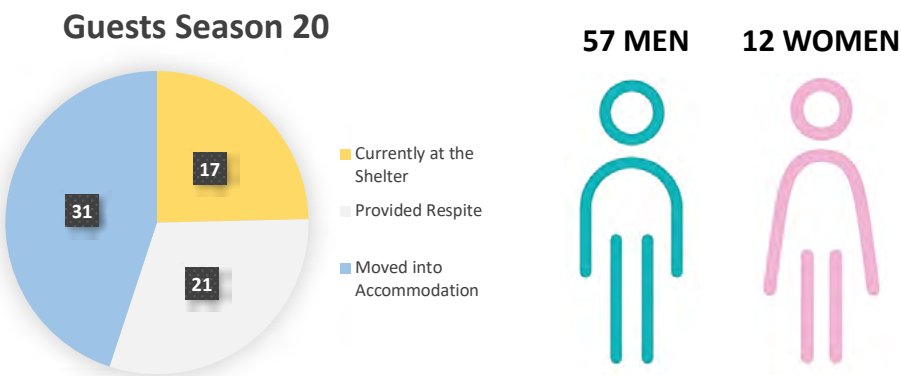
RECONCILING DIFFERENCES IN A TROUBLED WORLD.

Gwyneth Wilson

•Winter Shelter at Pond Square Chapel

My role in organising food, cooks and volunteers for the winter shelter came to an end in mid-January, but Pond Square Chapel continues to host the winter shelter on Sunday nights and Monday mornings.

As last year volunteers from St Michael’s Camden Town take over for the second “half” of the winter shelter season which runs from the beginning of November to the end of March. They organise a warm welcome for guests and deal with all the logistics – we just provide the space!



Season 20	Total
Provided Respite	21
Moved into Accommodation	31
Currently at the Shelter	17
Total Guests so Far	69

C4WS has provided some details on the guests they have helped since November 2023.

Patricia Judd

• Community Lunch

As many of you are aware, over many years, we have been part of running an exciting community lunch. Over the past year, it would be fair to say that 2024 has brought new life and energy into this important and valued outreach.

For several reasons, in 2023, Highgate Newtown Community Partnership was no longer able to continue providing lunch overseen by their chef Lulu. We, of course, are thankful for the years this outreach ran as a joint effort and for the friendship we built with Lulu.

For a period following Lulu's departure, we kept the lunch running thanks to the kindness of church members and friends of the congregation who made soup and sandwiches so that the lunch could continue to provide an open, welcoming and caring space for those who regularly came through the doors. We cannot thank those who helped and continued to attend enough.



Following a successful application to The National Lottery, we were delighted to receive enough funding to enable us to appoint a new chef, engage in some marketing and recommence offering a two-course meal every Thursday for £2 or whatever a person can afford.

Nikki, the new chef with years of experience in the catering industry, has proved to be an inspired choice. From the first week, she settled into the role, became a firm favourite with the regular guests, has tried to create a customer-led menu (by getting them to suggest what they would like) and as testimony to her amazing



cooking, numbers have grown week on week as word of mouth has spread. All of which is making the Thursday lunch club an event not to be missed.

This event is volunteer-led, and we are grateful for those who have gifted their time to help with hosting, serving and washing dishes. We are always open to others joining the team/rota to ensure this outreach goes from strength to strength.



•Dates for the diary

MARCH 2024

Sun 24th 10.30 am
Palm Sunday Morning worship

Thur 28th 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 29th 9.30 am
Good Friday

Join Churches Together in Highgate at All Saints, Talbot Road at 9.30am leaving at approx. 9.40am after prayers.

We stop for short readings and prayers along the way, ending in the forecourt of St Joseph's from where we walk up Highgate Hill to Pond Square Chapel for a short act of Good Friday worship

10.30 am
Worship followed by tea/coffee and Hot Cross Buns

12.30 pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 31st 10.30 am
Easter Sunday Morning Worship

APRIL 2024

Thur 4th 11.00 am
No Informal Bible Study during one week
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 5th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 7th 10.30 am
Morning Worship

Thur 11th 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 12th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 14th 10.30 am
Morning Worship
12noon Community Lunch

Thur 18th 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 19th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 21st 10.30 am
Morning Worship

Thur 25th 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 26th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 28th 10.30 am
Morning Worship

MAY 2024

Thur 2nd 10.00 am
Noon Little Village Baby Bank Donation drive
11.00am Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 3rd 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 5th 10.30 am
Morning Worship

Thur 9th 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 10th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 12th 10.30 am
Morning Worship
The service will include communion

Thur 16th 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 17th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 19th 10.30 am
Morning Worship
The service will include communion

Thur 23rd 11.00 am
Informal Bible Study
12noon Community Lunch

Fri 24th 12.30pm
Meditation via Zoom

Sun 26th 10.30 am
Morning Worship
The service will include communion





SAVE THE DATE

You are invited to join us!

Where?

at 42 Onslow Gardens, N10 3JX
or the church's annual garden party

When?

Saturday 29th June

What time?

The event will run from 12noon to 4pm

Feel free to drop by & stay for as long as you can!
Refreshments will be waiting for you