

INTERCESSIONS Please pray for the long term sick and those in special need, among them:

Holly Ryan, Wendy Webb, Ann-Marie and Andy, David Games, Abigail, Melanie, Dan, Angela, Anna and Phoenix, Philip, Chris, Lewis, Ilona Zimon, Steven Wiltshire, Julie, Michael, Sue Goodall, Alex Underwood, Peter Parsons, Richard Gurney, Brian, Jonathan, Martin Souter

THE CLERGY would like to thank all those who kindly sent them cards and gifts at Christmas. They are particularly grateful to those who gave presents to the children, gifts which are very much appreciated by their recipients.

ADVENT FUNDRAISING Thanks are due to all who contributed to the Advent sales, stall and raffle, in particular Muriel Hunt, Sally Lawton, Susan Purver and Ruth Wynne-Davies. If you have the opportunity, please thank those involved in person for their marvellous effort.

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS at St Mary Magdalen's matched our high standards and expectations. Stephen, lately our Director of Music, and Will his successor, must be congratulated on all their efforts, as must David our organist and our excellent singers. Thanks is due to all those who helped to clean, decorate and staff the church for the various services, especially Sally Lawton, Joyce Day and Simon Cuff.

CHURCH WATCHING Fr Richard writes: Thanks once again to all who have helped to keep Mary Mags an 'open' church for tourists and passers-by during 2011. This is a vital part of our ministry as a city-centre church, and the number of candles lit at the end of each day is a testimony to how highly it is valued. We do need more help to ensure that we can keep our doors reliably open on weekday afternoons. If you feel able to help, however occasionally, please do let me know. If you would prefer to church-watch as part of a pair, I am happy to try to arrange that. Many hands make light work!

SUNDAY CELEBRANTS All Sunday masses in January will be celebrated by Fr Peter, Fr Martin or Fr John.

BAPTISM On Sunday 15th January we welcome David Andrew Lovelock Knibb, the newborn son of Caroline Lovelock from our congregation, to baptism at the High Mass. Congratulations to Caroline and Jonathan on David's birth, on 23rd November.

THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY runs from 18–25 January. Please pray for Churches Together and all involved in ecumenical work. We at St Mary Magdalen's should also pray particularly for our brothers and sisters worshipping at the Priory of the Holy Spirit, Blackfriars, which is the only church of another Christian denomination within our parish boundaries.

WALSINGHAM PILGRIMAGE On Saturday 28th January, there will be a parish pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. We will leave Oxford early, approximately 7.30am, and return in the evening. Numbers may be limited, depending on the number of cars and drivers we can muster. If you would like to come, please leave your name with Joyce Day in church or email Fr Peter on peter.groves@theology.ox.ac.uk.

SERMON FOR MIDNIGHT MASS

by Fr Peter

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.” Isaiah 9.1

Night-time has, in our society and culture, largely been replaced by evening. We people say that had a great night out, what they really mean is that they had a great evening out. The night they will spend not out but in at home, sleeping in their beds. Real night, the time of darkness and silence, is still something through which most of us slumber. Of course the growth of artificial light and the flexibility of some licensing laws do mean that many people are enjoying themselves during the time which would previously have been called night. But, unless the revellers are actually avoiding sleep entirely, they are not transforming the night so much as postponing it to the time when they will snore off the excesses of the previous evening.

Night-time is more likely to be associated with death than with birth. We do not, however much we enjoy ourselves in the evenings, tend to associate the word night with unbridled positivity. On the eve of the first world war, the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey is held to have commented that “the lamps are going out all over Europe”. The darkness which ensues is in no sense a good thing. This year past has been, in many ways, a dark one. Illuminated at times, to be sure, by the Ashes, by the Royal Wedding, by Queens Park Rangers winning promotion, but overall we will remember 2011 as a time of gloom and of anger—the words riot and recession have been far more common than the words peace and goodwill. One crisis lurches into another while those in positions of power and influence posture against one another and sign away the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people with the stroke of a pen or the compromise of a congress.

Night-time, however, has its own magic, and its magic is precisely nothing to do with us. The reason night-time still disconcerts us is because of its darkness. It is not simply the primal human fear of that which we cannot see that is likely to make us uncomfortable, it is the all too rational knowledge that there are things which are beyond our control, beyond that very rational knowledge on which we rely. Night-time can disconcert us, but it can dazzle us as well, because during the night who knows what may happen, and when we rise from sleep, who can say what has changed during our rest. Everyone remembers the childlike excitement of waking up in the morning to a white glow and realising that during the night the snow has come and the landscape has changed beyond recognition. The suddenness of the surprise means that something which happened gradually, little by little, is experienced as an all-at-once event, as if one moment we looked away, and the next we looked back to find that the world had changed colour in a flash. But it wasn't in a flash. While we were unable to perceive it, as if secretly and silently, the snow fell. We missed the event, but we felt its effects.

The teaching of Jesus makes much of the notion of secrecy. The mystery of the kingdom is doubly a mystery—first because it lies beyond our comprehension, but also because it eludes us despite the fact that it is coming to fruition before our very eyes. The growth of a seed is imperceptible, but it is still growth. That which we cannot follow or measure is nevertheless something transformative. The contrast between the effects and what we were actually able to see is so great that we convince ourselves that something has happened in secret, something was being kept from us, or else surely we would have been able to see.

In the nativity of Christ, God comes among us in the darkness of the night-time. Literally, as the gospel of Luke tells us, because those who hear the news and visit him are the less than respectable people out on the hillside tasked with the awful



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work of keeping the flock safe during the cold of the night. But God comes to us in the darkness of night-time also by slipping unnoticed into our world, into our lives, into our hearts, so that we are all too likely to miss the event and will eventually see only its effects. That one night of which Luke tells us is the most significant of all nights. It changed everything, everyone, literally all that is and was and ever could be, and yet how many people noticed, what difference did anyone see? The shepherds went back to their flocks—what happened to them? Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up, as far as we can tell, as an ordinary Jewish child. They returned to the family home, they fulfilled the usual rituals, they failed to understand his strange talk of the Father. I'm always reminded of that lovely *Private Eye* cartoon of the holy family, with Mary and Joseph the proud parents of the newborn, staring down at the crib and saying "We won't let it change our lives". But in one important sense, they didn't, because this is—in appearance at least—just another baby in occupied Palestine who will grow up and become just another man.

How familiar it all looks. Nothing has changed. And yet, in the secrecy of that night, everything has changed, because the world is no longer simply the world, it is the dwelling place of God himself, and human beings are no longer simply human beings, they are the adopted children of God, they are the creatures who can share in the life of the one who made them. What looked like—what was—night-time, the darkness in which everything goes unnoticed, is the time and the place of God's eternal act. There is nothing secret about God's endless pouring out of life and love into the world he has created, except that our inability to see it makes it utterly secret, completely surprising, totally confounding of all our expectations.

The night through which we sleep has—in one sense—never ended. As the carol puts it, yet with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long; beneath the angel strain has rolled two thousand years of wrong, and man at war with man hears not the love song which they bring. The secrecy, the veil we impose upon the strange and wonderful work of God's love, still covers our hearts and our lives. The events of this year, the grim prospect of the future, should leave no-one blind to the needs of God's world.

But tonight, we wait and we watch because we know what is coming. God has opened to us the secret of his love. We know what is coming because we have seen its effect, have met the man Jesus of Nazareth, have heard the word of God speak to the hearts of greed and violence and suffering and have seen the possibility of love, the opportunity to do things differently, the invitation to walk with God towards not against our neighbour. The secrecy of this night promises the transformation of everything there is, before our very eyes, unnoticed but nonetheless real. The promise of a world turned upside down by the birth of a child into poverty, disgrace and oppression is—perversely—the brightest of lights in the darkest hour of the night.

Sunday Readings

JAN 1ST:	Numbers 6.22–27	Galatians 4.4–7	Luke 2.15–21
JAN 8TH:	Isaiah 60.1–6	Ephesians 3.2–6	Matthew 2.1–12
JAN 15TH:	1 Samuel 3.3–10, 19	1 Cor 6.13–15, 17–20	John 1.35–42
JAN 22ND:	Jonah 3.1–5, 10	1 Cor 7.29–31	Mark 1.14–20
JAN 29TH:	Malachi 3.1–4	Hebrews 2.14–18	Luke 2.22–32

Services
Sundays : Eucharist at 8 am and 5.30 pm
 Mattins 10 am
 High Mass at 10.30 am
Weekdays : Eucharist at 12.15 pm and 6.00 pm
 Morning Prayer 8.15 am, Evening Prayer 5.40 pm

Confessions
 Daily after the 12.15 pm Mass, Wednesdays & Saturdays at 6.30 pm

Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage
 By appointment with the Parish Priest

Parish Clergy

The Reverend Dr Peter Groves
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Calendar for January 2012

1	Sun	MOST HOLY NAME OF JESUS	<i>Thanksgiving for the Incarnation</i>
2	M	Ss Basil and Gregory, Bs Drs	<i>John, our Bishop</i>
3	T	Feria	<i>Rowan our Archbishop</i>
4	W	Feria	<i>Oxfam</i>
5	Th	Feria	<i>Oxford deanery</i>
6	F	Feria	<i>World peace</i>
7	S	Feria	<i>Students</i>
8	Sun	EPIPHANY OF THE LORD <i>Ordinary Time begins</i>	<i>Parish community</i>
9	M	Feria	<i>Our choir and musicians</i>
10	T	Feria	<i>The PCC</i>
11	W	Feria	<i>Vocations</i>
12	Th	Aelred of Rievaulx, Ab	<i>Christian Aid</i>
13	F	Hilary, B Dr	<i>Helen and Douglas House</i>
14	S	Feria	<i>Monthly requiem</i>
15	Sun	SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR	<i>Parish Community</i>
16	M	Feria	<i>The homeless</i>
17	T	Antony, Ab	<i>Religious communities</i>
18	W	Feria: <i>anointing at 6pm mass</i>	<i>Healing Ministry</i>
19	Th	Wulfstan, B: <i>anointing at 12.15pm</i>	<i>Oxford's hospitals</i>
20	F	Feria	<i>Christian Unity</i>
21	S	Agnes V M	<i>Children</i>
22	Sun	THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR	<i>Parish Community</i>
23	M	Feria	<i>Churches Together</i>
24	T	Francis de Sales B Dr	<i>Ecumenical work</i>
25	W	Conversion of Paul	<i>Preachers</i>
26	Th	Timothy & Titus, Aps	<i>Bishops</i>
27	F	Feria	<i>The persecuted church</i>
28	S	Thomas Aquinas, Dr	<i>Christian scholars</i>
29	Sun	CANDLEMAS	<i>Parish Community</i>
30	M	Feria	<i>The bereaved</i>
31	T	John Bosco, Pr	<i>Church schools</i>