

## Our Lady Immaculate and Saint Cuthbert's Church,

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Dear Friend,

With our new Parish Priest Fr. John, our Sisters Paschaline and Mary Jane we look forward to the great season of Advent and Christmas.

We see the shops overflowing with all kinds of goodies. Christmas Trees are starting to appear in the windows and our children are getting excited and anticipating the great day. And **it is a wonderful day** – a time for families and friends to get together on the one day of the year the shops are not open! As Christians we rejoice in the goodwill and happiness but we also **remember what it is all about**. Years ago in Crook we held a **Christmas Tableau**. We organised a flat-backed pantechinon and built a fragile wooden stable up on the back; we then arranged for the children from our school to dress up as the Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, wise men and angels. The costumes were stunning. Our then Parish Priest **Fr. Lowrie** directed the production and sat in the back of the stable controlling the recorded Christmas carol music – occasionally lending hand to keep the Angel Gabriel from falling over, as the lorry turned a corner! It wouldn't pass the health and safety rules nowadays but the people of our parish decided that even in those innocent days of the 1950s and 60s, they wanted to put **CHRIST** back into **CHRISTMAS**. The Tableau toured the town and housing estates and ended up in the market place **evangelising** in a very special way.

Pope Francis would have been very pleased with that effort of ours, all those years ago. He is continually urging us to remember that our responsibility is to make Jesus Christ part of our every-day lives and to share the joy and hope that He brings. Fr. John, our new parish priest, wants us to take **evangelisation** seriously and is inviting us to join together, meet and think of ways to spread the word today in 2017 and 2018.

Christmas is a wonderful *God given* opportunity for us **to spread the joy of the gospel** and offer kindness and generosity to others. In our own town of Crook, many people will struggle with Christmas. Some will be lonely, some will be unhappy, some families won't meet up because of a slight or misunderstanding years ago – others will meet but won't be able to afford the turkey and trimmings that we take for granted. There will be children who get very few presents and some, maybe none at all. Many people will miss the real, **life changing meaning of Christmas**. **Across the globe** in the many places of war, hunger and strife – children and families will suffer as they do every other day of the year.

**We are blessed** to treasure the message of **peace, hope and joy** in our hearts – we can practice our faith and share our joy with others. Let us this Christmas thank God for what we have, share it with others and remember in our prayers, our wallets and our letters/emails the children and families in our town, country and world who have so little.

We are delighted Father John is settling in so well – we are blessed to have him with us and hope that he enjoys his time here in Crook, Wolsingham and Tow Law. The weather may be a shade chilly over here but our hearts are warm and welcoming.

Our School continues to thrive – our Head **Mrs Donnelly** has been here four years now and the links between the school and church grow stronger. This year there will be no First Communion Class – the Bishops have suggested that children should be in Year 4 before they start the communion programme. A year off for Mrs. Ringwood, who has been our faithful and enthusiastic First Communion leader for the last few years.

Sister Paschaline is starting a **Baptism preparation class**; Father John wants our **Evangelisation Group** to make a real difference and bring people back into our church. Once a month before Mass on a Sunday we will have the opportunity to pray before the Blessed Sacrament reflecting the Pope's desire that we have opportunities to get closer to Christ in the Real Presence.

Links with our other **Faith Communities** are strong and comfortable – at Remembrance we came together with all the churches to remember those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. Our local churches leaders supported Fr. John at his inspiring Induction Mass – a great sign of hope and confidence and a wonderful occasion for all three parishes, the Partnership and our friends and neighbours.

The **Justice and Peace Group** has been very active this year and Belinda's Fair Trade Stall is a regular reminder of the great work done in our name, to bring justice and peace to our world. The **SVP** and **Minnie Vinnies** are an inspiration, as is the work done to sustain **Fr. Ejaz's** difficult mission in Pakistan.

**St Cuthbert's Centre** grows in popularity and usefulness for our church and town. The programme for Advent and Christmas is out now and it offers much that takes us forward and holds us together. Thanks be to God for the building and those who maintain it so beautifully. Our **Escomb Partnership** is developing with real energy and enthusiasm. Together we can do much more – a Youth Mission, spiritual and social gatherings and opportunities that individually we couldn't hope to do ourselves. Let us pray that 2018 will be a great year for moving *forward together in hope*.

There is much activity in our community – many faithful and involved people giving their time and effort and doing so with happiness and fun. Nevertheless our numbers are falling. There



are less people of every age coming to church. In the New Year we will be looking at ways to keep our young people involved and let them feel ownership of our church and community. That requires us all to be open to new thoughts and ideas. There is very little difference between standing still and going backwards. We want to continue to move forward as a **welcoming, tolerant, joyful, Christian Community** that smiles and understands (even when we get things wrong) that we are **all just doing our best** to live out the gospel of Jesus and spread that peace and hope and joy to others.

We may not have the Christmas Tableau taking the Bethlehem stable around the town – but we can ourselves take the **inspiring and reassuring message of Christmas** out to our friends and families in the forthcoming weeks and invite them to share the wonderful journey with us as we move into 2018

With every blessing for Advent and Christmas

**Fr. John** Parish Priest and **Maria Crawford** – Chair of Parish Council