

The Parish of St Peter & St Mary New Fishbourne and the Parish of St Mary the Virgin Apuldram

www.fishbournechurch.org.uk www.apuldramchurch.co.uk

The Revd Clive A. Ashley

Rector of Fishbourne and Priest in Charge of Apuldram

The Rectory, 31 Caspian Close, Fishbourne, Chichester, West Sussex PO18 8AY

Rectory Tel: (01243) 783364 Email: cliveashley@btinternet.com

Church Office (01243) 784283 E-mail fishbournechurch@btinternet.com

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Dear Parishioners

Besides the TV advertisements, what lies behind that much loved image of a white beard, red suit, sleigh bells and reindeer?

If we go back to the fourth century, at Patara in Lycia, a province of Asia Minor a boy was born and given the name Nicholas. He was well brought up by his parents and it is said he 'trod piously in their footsteps'. He loved the Church and found great comfort and encouragement there. Sadly, his parents died when he was a young man. However, they left him well off and he decided to devote his inheritance not to the fourth century equivalent of fast cars but to works of charity. An opportunity soon arose within his own community. A citizen of Patara had lost all his money, how we don't know and it doesn't appear to be important to the overall account. This citizen had three daughters to support and in those days, you will no doubt be aware, a dowry was required from the Father of the girl to make her eligible for marriage, thank goodness that tradition is a thing of the past! There was no money, no dowry and therefore no marriages. In order to survive, the Father of these girls was going to give them over to prostitution! This dire situation came to the ears of Nicholas, who took a bag of gold and, under cover of darkness, threw it in through an open window of the man's house. Here was a dowry for the eldest girl and she was soon duly married. At intervals Nicholas did the same for the second and third daughter. However, the Father watched and waited when it came to the third girl. Recognizing his daughter's benefactor the Father overwhelmed Nicholas with his gratitude. These gifts are represented as three golden bags or balls. Later on Nicholas came to the city of Myra when the Church were in session to elect a new bishop. Nicholas was indicated as the one who should be chosen. This was a time of great persecution, and as their Bishop, Nicholas was seized by the authorities, tortured, chained and imprisoned with many other Christians. Fortunately, Constantine became Emperor of Rome and released the Christians. Nicholas returned to Myra as Bishop. He was loved by all the people because he would stand up for the Christian truth against all kinds of false teaching. Nicholas is thought to have been amongst those involved in the famous Council of Nicaea in 325AD who formulated the Statement of Christian belief we use today in our worship. He was also considered a guardian of his people because he would actively intervene where he knew an injustice was being done. Indeed, there is one famous occasion when the Emperor Constantine dreamt of Nicholas who told him to release three innocent men, the next day Constantine consulted his prefect and the men were set free. Constantine then wrote to Bishop Nicholas asking him not to threaten him anymore but to pray for the peace of the world. St Nicholas is venerated as the patron saint of bakers, pawnbrokers, sailors, children, prisoners and captives. He is also the Patron Saint of several countries, cities and Diocese, amongst the countries is Greece and with St Andrew the Apostle, St Nicholas is co-patron saint of Russia. How did he become associated with Christmas? Because of his saintly patronage of children; the Church in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands would associate his name with the giving of presents at Christmas time. This custom may have then been taken to America by Dutch Protestants and in time was introduced to England as Santa Claus. What if anything might he say to us this Christmas? He may say to those of us who are parents or grandparents, if you give your children nothing else in life, share with them your faith, your love of God and teach them to love their neighbour. He may say to those of us who for better or for worse have some responsibility for others, have some self-respect and equally respect for your neighbour, don't be afraid to stand up and be counted for what is right and just on behalf of those who have no voice. Thirdly, to those who of us who have 'something' St Nicholas may say 'share your 'something' with those who are in need'

A very happy Christmas to you all
Clive

Our aim is to be a Christian faith community, which will provide a spiritual and theological family base from which Christ will be proclaimed by word and example in the wider community, now and in the future