

NOTES FROM SOMEWHERE NEAR THE RECTORY

From Tony Jefferis

For many the end of January and the beginning of February are the gloomiest days of the year. The nights are long, the days are short, it is cold and wet, and this year is the third year of Covid restrictions, with some limits to our freedom continuing.

And yet there are signs of hope: in our gardens the snowdrops are beginning to show. The common snowdrop's botanical name is *galanthus nivalis*, a Greco-Roman mixture: *gala* means 'milk' in Greek, and *anthos* means 'flower'. *Nivalis* comes from the Latin, meaning 'of the snow'. The 'milk-flower of the snow' is not native to the UK, coming here in Roman times from Eastern Europe.

Snowdrops have a wide and varied place in European folklore: for example, in Germany, the story goes that when God created the earth, the flowers were asked to give some of their colour to the snow. All refused, apart from the snowdrop which, as a reward, was allowed to bloom each year before all other flowers. In another account, Eve was weeping in her barren garden after the 'Fall of Man' when an angel comforted her by blowing on to a snowflake and turning it into a snowdrop. A flower bloomed, and hope was born. Whilst some of the folk tales are darker, the flower has long been viewed as a symbol of hope for better times ahead.

In the Church it is associated with Candlemas when the church remembers the presentation of the boy Jesus in the Temple, and as a result, snowdrops were sometimes known as Candlemas Bells.

The snowdrop is a pretty bell-shaped flower, composed of six white flower segments or sepals. It is beautiful as an individual bloom, and different varieties are much sought after by galanthophiles, snowdrop enthusiasts. The flowers are also beautiful in a group, as can be seen in many of our local churchyards. St Peter's usually has an impressive cluster, but this year they are obscured by the building work on the tower, and at St Mary's we hope there will be an emerging display this year, after several people from the village planted fifty or sixty clumps round the beech tree. We wait expectantly!

It is this combination of beauty as an individual flower and beauty in a group that I would like to highlight. This is one of the central messages of Christianity: anyone, any individual, is welcome, whatever their origin, whatever they do. Equally, all are called to be in community to love each other, to be a body which respects and values others who are differently gifted.

So, can I commend visiting a churchyard with great snowdrops (Swyncombe is particularly good) and perhaps even giving church a try. You will be welcomed as an individual, and whatever your inclination, you will enrich our community.

The Rector, Simon Cronk, is away