Christmas Greetings
from Andrew and Diana in Wells, Somerset 2025

It has been a year of many blessings and I tell of a just a few below. Mercifully their opposite, life's inevitable curses and setbacks, have been largely absent. To begin, however, a take on Christmas from my current favourite poet, Alicia E Stallings:

Daughter & daughters set up the crib - Shepparton 2010

First Miracle

Her body like a pomegranate torn
Wide open, somehow bears what must be born,

The irony where a stranger small enough
To bed down in the ox-tongue-polished trough

Erupts into the world and breaks the spell
Of the ancient, numbered hours with his yell.

Now her breasts ache and weep and soak her shirt
Whenever she hears his hunger or his hurt;

She can't change water into wine; instead
She fashions sweet milk out of her own blood.

The first of the year's blessings came from my four children, their spouses and my grandchildren. They happily arranged to dilute and spread the celebration of my 80th birthday from the far too heavy concentration of a single November day, to a whole summer-month of happy and joyful get-togetherness. The seven Australian based family members and the seven English based ones, joined up with us for much fun and frolic. We went sightseeing here there and every-where, ate well, drank well, talked, laughed, argued and worshipped well. How lovely they all are, and how lovely a time it was. Should my eightieth birthday prove to be my last, which it shows not the slightest sign of being, I would be a miserable prune to be unable and unwilling to smile as I whispered and meant from the bottom of my heart, the first line of the Nunc Dimittis: "*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.....*"

Elizabeth, Papa, Rachel, David, Peter

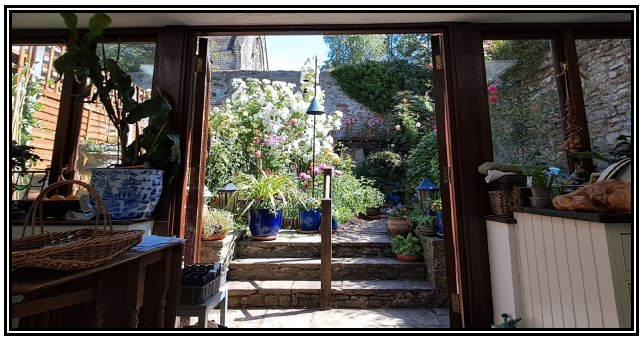
My family in England is enlarged by Diana's and to our delight they mingle happily. My two families live close to Diana's son 'Pula's and so we can enjoy all three families in a single trip to stay with one, or either of the others, in Chiddingfold, Grayshott or Haslemere. Child-minding, dog-sitting, gardening and generation mingling help keep Diana in tune, in touch, active, positive and on the ball. Me too, though without quite displacing my not too unattractive, I trust, traditionalism and conserv-atism. Diana's daughter Martha's family live two miles up the road from us, here in Wells. They host our veg-etable garden and have the key to our house and hearts. Mainland Australia based Peter, with Elizabeth in Tasmania, compensate for distance by being the most WhatsApp-communicative of all my four, bless them.

Hetty, Lucy, me, Thomas, Meg, Josephine, Susie, James and Phoebe the dog

Another of the year's boons has been Diana. She cuts my toe nails as well as my hair, puts three different eye drops into my eyes daily, to a varying and

complicated timetable that requires mathematical calculations well beyond me. Her sense of humour and of the ridiculous as irreverent as my own, she continues to laugh genuinely at my jokes. She is hugely practical, always "teeming with a lot of news", appreciates my cooking and is great fun to share home and life with. She is also far more valued at the Cathedral than I am, tirelessly mending, cleaning, altering, tweaking, patching and fitting tired, frayed, torn, sweat-stained, albs, cassocks, cinctures, chasubles, dalmatics, tunicles, copes and altar frontals.

She also has a past intriguingly rich in corners yet to be explored. I lost my wedding ring a while ago and after a month or two of observing ancient biddies speculatively regard my ringless hand, she pulled from one of her many boxes of 'this and that', a replacement ring to be duly shaped and enlarged to fit my finger. As a very young student she had been engaged, it seems, to a mysterious fellow called Roland. The ring is the sole relic from a happy escape.



Our garden spills over into the house

Lifelines, deadlines and worship

A third important blessing comes from past parishioners, friends and family members who provide me with the lifeline of a daily and weekly deadline to meet. A group of about thirty receive and appear to appreciate, a selected poem and commentary each day, except on Sundays. It's a deadline that keeps me searching for, reading and appreciating more and more poetry. Another and much larger group, receives a weekly article with illustrative photographs. This too keeps me thinking, writing, and observing. It's been and remains a boon and blessing, certainly to me, but also possibly to those recipients who actually read them.

A fourth blessing is worship. We are a five minute stroll from one of the most beautiful and musical cathedrals in the country, with an excellent Dean and ministerial team. When in residence we are at worship every morning, without fail and as often as not every evening too, for Choral Evensong. On Sundays we frequently visit lovely, usually sparsely attended, often struggling, but heroically defended and supported country churches, at which I officiate. Old Skipton, Ararat, Wodonga, Shepparton and Boldre sermons are polished up and honed-down to a non didactic, upbeat, eloquent brevity. Lucky, lucky rustic bumpkins.

To end, another seasonal poem from A E Stallings, it deals with the problem of how and where to place the Wise Men at the household Christmas Crib and remain true to the narrative.

The Magi

Christmas Eve, The Word made Flesh,
We put the baby in the manger,
But could not add them to the créche —
They still had miles of doubt and danger.

They set out from the staircase landing,
Travelling lightly and untrammelled:
One was kneeling, one was standing,
And our favourite was cameled.

Past falling cards and other perils
They crossed the piano's dark plateau
Where someone fumbled Christmas carols
And sang of silence, stars and snow.

They camped wherever they were able,
A potted fern for an oasis.
From shelf to windowsill to table,
Night by night, we'd change their places.

The thrill of our own gifts forgot,
No longer new, the batteries
Gone dead, at last they'd reach the spot,
One king already on his knees,

One kneeling, while the camel grunted —
Twelve whole days of Christmas hence —
To give what no child ever wanted:
Gold and myrrh and frankincense.

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Blessings abundant
For Christmas &
the New Year.