Welcome to the 5th weekly prompt on **Gladness and Generosity**.

Yesterday afternoon children and adults together decorated the Christmas tree in church.  This custom began in Victorian times, but unlike much of that era, seems to be as popular as ever.  What do we mean by decorating the tree?  Is it just fun, or is there a deeper meaning?  The Victorians put candles on a tree – dangerous, we would say, but symbolising light in the darkness of winter.  In his gospel John says, ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.’  There is much darkness today – may God’s light illuminate the dark corners of our lives and our world – as the song says, ‘Shine, Jesus, Shine’.

In December the days continue to get shorter.  With electric light and central heating we are protected from the worst of winter, but even so many of us suffer a little SADness (seasonal affective disorder), and long for spring.  In past ages it was so much worse.  People saw the sun getting lower and lower day by day, and feared that it might disappear altogether, meaning cold, hunger and ultimately death.  How glad they were when the winter solstice passed and they could see the beginning of the return of the sun.  Perhaps that is why we celebrate Christmas just after the shortest day – so that gladness at the coming of the Son goes hand in hand with the return of the sun.

Does this gladness affect what we do?  Hopefully so.  At this time of the year we tend to be deluged with appeals to help the needy. It’s tempting to ignore them – there are too many!  Meanwhile many people of all ages will be opening day 3 of their Advent calendars today, hoping for a pre-Christmas treat.  An interesting new custom is Reverse Advent calendars, which some of our local schools are practising – children are encouraged to bring in each day something to give to those in need, for instance, via a food bank.  Can you practise reverse Advent this year?  Can you give something tangible, or perhaps just a smile or good wishes, to an individual you know?  Can you join the church in giving a Christmas blessing to the community, for instance, through yarn-bombing this Thursday – see your Notices for details.   **May the gladness we know in the darkness of winter stimulate our generosity to those in need.**

*Produced by Daphne and John Wilkins on behalf of the Bents Green Holy Habits Planning Group (Debs Barnett, Glenn Evans, Martyn Read, Graham Wassell, Daphne and John).  You can find more information on the Circuit Holy Habits Programme on the Sheffield Methodist Circuit website and also the Sheffield Methodist Circuit Facebook page.*