

Tracy and I were going to write these words to you sitting together in front of a warm fire, with a mug of cocoa in one hand, but somehow I've ended up sitting alone in the car writing it. This isn't pure eccentricity, nor has Tracy sent me out into the cold. I'm actually sitting by the roadside at a beautiful and rather desolate spot high up on the Trough of Bowland, with three wheels attached to my Land Rover and a further wheel nearby, thinking rather un-Christmassy thoughts about the mechanic who changed my brake discs yesterday. But the AA is supposed to be on its way so I'm enjoying the view and the opportunity to write to you undisturbed.

We hope that life has been good to you recently. Of course, when we look back there have been lots of good things here too, but we can't deny that the end of this year sees us all rather tired and flat, and we've not had the energy or time for the important things like staying in touch with friends! This is almost certainly to be our last Christmas in Kelbrook (Tracy has decided not to continue as priest-in-charge here); but where our next destination is to be is as yet unclear. We'll keep you posted.

For Tracy it's therefore been a year of finishing off things. She completed her theology degree (with a high 2/i) and has started to focus on getting things in the parish to function properly after she's gone. She's been lecturing in New Testament this year for St John's University York – interesting but she's glad not to have to do it all the time! My (Tim) latest book was published recently (WH Smith is currently undercutting Amazon on it by a couple of pounds!), as well as a new CD and an article in the US. Next year has a new commission to write a university music textbook in Norwegian, some more CDs and lots of concerts (five tours in Germany alone!), as well as work at Lancaster University and at Holy Trinity Skipton. So no real idleness this coming year!

Beth (18 next March) is enjoying the freedom of having passed the driving test – and her parents are enjoying having an extra taxi driver in the house, too! After contemplating courses at what seemed to be every university beginning with an "E" (or, looked at another way, all the places a long way from home such as Edinburgh, Exeter and Essex) she's now planning a year out, with what looks like the gleam of travel in her eyes, to look at a wider range of possibilities. Out every morning at 6 feeding horses, on the stage with a local theatre company and passing dance exams with distinction, she's full of energy.

Matthew (16 next April) is a King (at any rate he was one at last night's nativity play out in the fields, which included a donkey living up to its reputation for stubbornness and Beth's sheepdog Hallie hiding in King Matthew's cloak to keep out of the way of a rather bad-tempered sheep with whom she had to share the stable). When he's not doing quite disgracefully well at school he's out bell ringing or swimming or at home reading (though last night he was working out quadratic equations for fun: it's quite scary sometimes).

Speaking of sheep, there's some wandering past the car window at the moment. No donkey, though – though that would perhaps come in handy for getting back home: three hours on there's no sign of the AA!

Andrew (now 12) is enjoying his new school as much as it's "cool" to be seen to do. He particularly enjoys science, largely because of a chemistry teacher who keeps blowing things up (and permanently has bandaged hands as a result). It does sound quite appealing. His free time is likely to be spent at a neighbouring farm – last weekend, for instance, selling sheep at the market. He chose to be confirmed this Autumn at Kelbrook, a big day for many family and friends.

Katie (7 next April) taught herself to swim during a summer holiday in Spain (with a little help from Beth and I) and has now joined a swimming club, which she enjoys. She's following her brothers and sister in reading everything she can get her hands on. She's cuddly, sociable and lively, enjoying music and visiting friends.

So what will next year bring? Changes, certainly. But despite all the uncertainties we're sure that there is a plan for it all and that the next episode will make as much sense as the last. But here comes a breakdown lorry over the hill – looks like I've got a way out of here! Better go!

Very best wishes for Christmas, from Tracy, Tim, Beth, Matt Andrew & Katie