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COMMENT

We must cherish our wonderful parish churches this Christmas

This Christmas Eve, when people pour out of the pub and head to Midnight Mass to belt out their old favourites, they could get a shock

ALLISON PEARSON



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When we left to make the frosty drive to the carol service on Sunday, the score was Argentina 2 France 0. By the time we entered the church, the tenors in the choir were staring in disbelief at their phones. Mbappe had scored. Twice! Somewhere between Ding Dong Merrily and Away in a Manger, it was whispered in the pews that another miracle had happened. The gospel reading from the pulpit said the Messiah was going to be born in Bethlehem. Good news, but in Qatar it was the Messi-ah who astounded the world.

Twenty-first-century man is sceptical of miracles, but we still recognise one when we see it. Football satisfies that thirst for wonder, which is why it can occasionally transcend 22 pairs of boots to achieve a kind of ecstasy. The hunger to believe in something, to be reconnected to joy through tradition and togetherness still lies deep within us, I think, and at Christmas it leads many to church who don't bother the rest of the time.

I don't know about you, but I find carol services more and more moving with every year that passes; perhaps because the child I was when I first learnt those lovely words half a century ago is still singing a distant descant. With that comes a memory of all the people I have loved who sang those carols too, but who will never sing again, yet somehow we keep them alive by repeating the old refrains. "O little town of Bethlehem/How still we see thee lie/Above the deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by."

That is the theme of the Church of England's rather magical 2022 campaign, Follow The Star: The Great Invitation. A lush, John Lewis-style advert begins with a gleeful little girl in a red coat dashing down a festive aisle and ends with her as an elderly widow still delighting in the Christmas service and consoled (or so we are supposed to deduce) by the everlasting comfort of Christian fellowship.



“Whose door is open?” asked Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York, in an article for the Sunday Telegraph. “The answer in just about every community, is the local parish church.”

Is it really, Archbishop? The vicar at our carol service on Sunday announced that he was embarking on a frantic Yuletide tour, from village church to village church, trying to provide as many services as he possibly could. The poor man was spread thinner than Shippams paste. All because clergy like him are an increasingly endangered species – some vicars are already serving 27 churches, while the CofE hierarchy apparently runs down the parish system despite claiming to be its biggest fan.

Archbishop Cottrell is being disingenuous when he writes “there have been some concerns recently that the parish church is somehow under threat... Yes, putting clergy into parishes costs a lot of money... Church buildings are also costly. But the Church of England is very committed, not only to support and revitalise the local church, not only to do all that we can to sustain clergy numbers, but also to plant and establish new worshipping communities, particularly in areas of new housing and in many of the most deprived urban, rural and coastal areas.”

I'm afraid it is not wrong to see the parish church as “under threat”, Archbishop. The Church's “Vision & Strategy” plan, which has never been voted for by the General Synod, is stealthily undermining the parish by channelling millions into dubious alternatives, such as people holding services in their own front room. Some dioceses already have a frightful “car-pool system” of clergy. Instead of a vicar living among the people – the centuries-old good-shepherd model – vicars are sent out from a central base. Chances are your parent will be buried by someone who never knew them. A friend who lost her Hampshire-dwelling father this year got a call from a volunteer in Leicester offering to take the service. It was profoundly alienating and upsetting; the very opposite of the loving continuity and rootedness people want from their local church.

Cottrell says that clergy and church buildings are costly. Yes, but it is the parishioners who pay for them out of the collection plate and fundraising, not the wealthy and growing central bureaucracy which squats on the Church like a toad.

Why is this abomination happening when so many love their local church building and can't imagine it not being there? Well, like many failing institutions (the NHS springs to mind), the CofE seeks to manage decline by grappling power and resources to the central bureaucracy while starving the frontline. Many clergy fall ill from the stress. Ludicrous job titles abound. Would you rather have a vicar you know, and who knows you, to baptise your baby or see £40,000 p.a. paid to Southwark's head of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation?

Two hundred years ago, the Church of England had 26 bishops. Today, there are around 116 bishops serving less than a tenth of the

congregation. Whatever justification can be made for that extravagance it is surely quite hard to reconcile with the teaching of Jesus Christ.

This Christmas Eve, when people pour out of the pub and head in a delightful whisky-and-ginger fug to Midnight Mass to belt out their old favourites, they could get a shock. The church doors may well be shut, the vicar elsewhere, conducting a service in one of the other churches in his “mega-parish”.

“O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him...” Something so good, a precious piece of tradition and transcendence in our culture – the hopes and fears of all the years – is being “disappeared”. God help us, for the bishops of the Church of England won’t. The Messi-ah would never score such a dreadful own goal.

Thanks for your support in this annus horribilis

I’ve been trying to think of a nice way of summarising 2022, but I gave up. It’s been an absolute sod of a year. Three prime ministers (still time to squeeze another one in, surely), four chancellors, two Tory leadership contests, one market crash, too many strikes to count, the death of our longest-serving monarch, the eviction of our shortest-serving PM. So crazy has it been that historians may wonder whether this year was some vast conspiracy to provide material for the ultimate pub quiz:

1. Who was Sue Gray and what was her interest in cake?
2. Which was the first sitting prime minister to have broken the law?
3. Name any member of the Cabinet in 2022 who wasn’t accused of bullying or “inappropriate conduct”?
4. Where is Nottingham Cottage and which TV personality said it was “really small”?
5. Chris Pincher – did he?
6. What was The Queue and how long was it?
7. Where is Irpin and what happened there?
8. Who boasted about her showing Boris her “ginger growler”?
9. Who rested on a catafalque?
10. Why was the Government spending £7 million a day on hotels?
11. Explain the meaning of Platty Jubes?
12. Who lasted less time than a lettuce?
13. How many players scored a goal in the World Cup final (trick question)?

The lying in state of Her Majesty in Westminster Hall provided a rare moment of dignity, discipline and national unity. After our beloved Queen left us, it felt like the whole place went to pot. Long live the King. Like lots of families in 2022, mine was dealing with difficult things, some the jagged consequences of lockdown.

The pesky black dog paid an unwelcome visit and I struggled to cope. But my Telegraph inbox and thousands of your letters and comments never ceased to be a source of wisdom, entertainment, companionship, mild pique and terrific humour. Not to mention the most inspired choleric outbursts. “My resignation letter from the Conservative Party” became a literary subgenre.

You lot keep me going and I hope I manage to repay that in some way. I did manage to wangle knee operations for several readers who were, in a very real sense, hopping mad at their lack of treatment

This column will not, as per the instruction of the University of Brighton, be referring to this as “the winter closure period” to avoid causing offence. Here’s hoping that you and yours have a wonderful Christmas.

As long as there’s us, things can never be that bad. Same time, same place in 2023.

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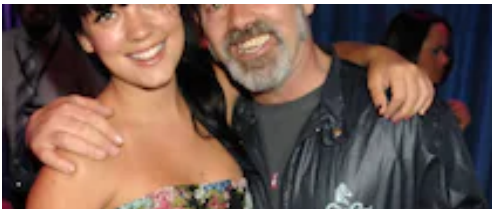


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