



PATRICK KIDD

Why people who won't set foot in church love nativity plays

[Patrick Kidd](#)

Saturday December 14 2024, 12.01am, The Times

Dame Judi Dench tells a story about
her daughter Finty's first steps in the

family profession when she was cast as the innkeeper's wife in a school nativity. For weeks, she solemnly rehearsed her line. A visitor to the house, told that Finty was in a play, asked what it was. "It's a nativity," the child replied. "And what is it about?" they asked. "Well," Finty said, "it is all about this innkeeper's wife..."

Every child is the star (sometimes *the* Star) in a nativity. Every shepherd No 5 or deputy sub-angel is just as important, to themselves and their family at any rate, as the girl playing Mary. My son, Humphrey, was cast last year in the small but crucial role of Herod's special adviser. I had wondered how the manifesto pledge to kill all boys under the age of two would play with focus groups, not to mention school rolls, but the former Supreme Court justice who was there to watch his granddaughter wearing a tea-towel on her head may have thrown it out.

That was my sixth and (sob) final nativity as a parent. In reception, Humph and his older sister, Hattie, had played angels in bedsheets and tinsel. Then came the animal year, with a creative menagerie to bolster the sheep, ox and ass. Hattie was not impressed to be cast as a chicken (one child unsuccessfully asked to be a Tyrannosaurus Rex), but in her final year she played the narrator. I was Joseph more than 40

years ago. My mother recalls me looking bored and picking my nose, which is probably what the original Joseph did.

People have been retelling the story of the birth of Christ through nativity plays for 800 years. The first was put on in the Italian hill town of Greccio in 1223 by John of Assisi, the son of a silk merchant who had chosen a life of monastic poverty. He was later better known by the nickname he acquired from his French mother and his father's business interests in her country.

Tableaux nativities using statues had long been created but when the future St Francis encouraged the townspeople to bring their animals to a stable for Midnight Mass, he created a new form of devotion. Thomas of Celano, Francis's first biographer, wrote that, inspired by a visit to the Holy Land, he had wanted to "bring to life the memory of that babe born in Bethlehem, to see as much as possible with my own bodily eyes, the discomfort of his infant needs; how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and ass standing by, he was laid upon a bed of hay". The reality of the scene enhanced the wonder at the story.

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So, Thomas went on, those who witnessed this first living nativity were filled with “a new and indescribable joy”. The priest then celebrated the Eucharist over the manger, linking their remembrance of Christ’s future sacrifice and his rise in glory to the humbling simplicity of his birth. The King of Kings came into this world small, poor and defenceless; in need, like us all, of love.

As we get older, we lose our sense of wonder. Tiredness, cynicism, a realisation that life is precarious and difficult: these drive away the simple joy of youth. Yet when the next generation put on a nativity play it can help us to see again the story of Christ’s birth in a stable through a child’s eyes and realise, if our hearts let us, that a miracle took place on that cold, star-blessed night.

Hattie had one more form of nativity when she was seven. Each year for decades there has been a Christmas Eve procession at dusk through Blackheath, southeast London, ending outside All Saints’ Church, where I am a warden. It is led by two children as Mary and

Joseph riding on a donkey. Or not, when Hattie played Mary. The regular donkey had gone lame and his understudy refused to leave his trailer, so Mary and Joseph led the community through the village on foot.

And by community, I mean far more than those who worship at church on a Sunday. A vast crowd formed behind the children and along both sides of the road as they walked down Tranquil Vale to the heath (in the distant past, I'm told, they even stopped at The Crown inn to be told there was no room). An estimated 1,500 people joined the throng at All Saints', where they sang carols to a brass band and gave money for Crisis, the homelessness charity.

What brings so many people out to take part in this religious ceremony when they might not set foot in a church the rest of the year? I suspect it is a hard-to-explain impulse to recapture that childish sense of wonder, to park their daily worries by joining in a simple ritual and to contemplate, perhaps, as they sing *Away in a Manger* that there is some deeper reason for our existence. Like the shepherds in the original story, they feel summoned to see the Holy Family.

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One year, it was especially magical. As we gathered on the heath, a bright light suddenly passed overhead, cutting through the clear sky and leading some to whisper to their children that it was the Star of Bethlehem or Santa Claus making an early start. That Christmas, the International Space Station joined our community nativity, sending our eyes and our wonder up to the heavens.

Patrick Kidd is diary editor at The Times

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Emma Thompson



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H

...

Thank you Patrick Kidd. A good reflection. You give a wise balance to your colleague's news item about the Revd Paul Chamberlain telling children Father Christmas does not exist. Over a thousand comments already by midnight. As I commented there: It is ok for a parent to tell a child that God does...

See more *(Edited)*

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Humphrey PRIDEAUX

...

A

AY AGO

Neither exists. It is a parents right rather than a guest speaker to make the declaration.

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↩ 2 replies

V

...

Andrew Hague

The vast majority of tge comments are ding dings between non believers and believers, Boring.

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J

...

Virginia Crook

There was the hotelier's son in the Highlands, cast as the innkeeper who knew, aged 6, to be hospitable. He followed his one line of 'no room at the inn' with- 'but come into the bar and have a dram and I'll phone round the Bed and breakfast places.' It brought the house down.

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Jane Graham

1 DAY AGO



Yes,we are in peak Nativity at present,with eight,six and four year old grandchildren. Alexander was the star.A Jewish boy at an all boys Catholic Prep School played Mary. My image of him running around the playground afterwards in his blue and white costume was fantastic. At every Nativity play,I'...

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Derek Wheeler

1 DAY AGO



Recapturing the innocence of youth is one of life's joys, especially at this time of year, be that through your children, your family or the wider community. Merry Christmas one and all.

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Keith Rosser

1 DAY AGO

P

...

“But, my dear Sebastian, you can’t seriously believe it all.” “Can’t I?” “I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass.” “Oh yes, I believe that. It’s a lovely idea.” “But you can’t believe things because they’re a lovely idea.” “But I do. That’s how I believe.”

Fro...

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Paddy Briggs

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1 DAY AGO

A

...

Sums it up perfectly. There never was a census taking people back to their ancestral lands, no new homes murdered



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Save

It is a nice story to tell the children to get them to link the established religion to the Northern European tradition of celebrating the rebirth of the year after the solstice.

Andrew Hague

23 HOURS AGO

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↩ 1 reply

K

...

What a lovely story, Patrick. Hattie and Humphrey, budding actors?

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L

Kate Hollywood

...

1 DAY AGO

My favourite nativity play story is the one where my little great nephew had the role of innkeeper. When asked by Joseph if there was room in the inn, he replied 'Yes please come in'.

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M

...

Mine was one in which my four year old great nephew playing a sheep delivered the last line of the Pogues' "Fairytale of New York", "Merry Christmas you" to the assembled parents.

22 HOURS AGO

When asked later by his teacher where he had heard such a thing, he replied "at my Granny's."

M: Frances, his Gran...

See more

21 HOURS AGO

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P

...

Carol singing in our local pub was enjoyed by many and hope some might actually come to the carol service if not regularly attend our church services.

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Priscilla Cullen

22 HOURS AGO

D

...

It may be a longing for something the adults think is lost for them but hope it won't be for the children. If only they knew that all is not actually lost.

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C

...

D Dolphin

I love nativity plays and carol concerts with brass bands etc despite being a committed atheist. Indeed I hate the term non believer- I always state that I am a total believer in that I utterly believe that there is nothing supernatural - we live we die, that's it.

But we need to recognise the power of community involvement be that in community carol singing, chanting at football matches or shouting "He's behind you" at the Panto etc etc. Its a similar buzz.

PS. My only gripe at Xmas is the number of Carol concerts dominated by choirs doing twiddly bits and graciously allowing the audience to only join in in a couple of carols. Carols above all songs are about the public joining in. I realise I am probably in a minority here.

Mr C

(Edited)

[Reply](#) - [☆ Recommend \(3\)](#) - [Share](#)

J

...

I don't think you are in a minority. I couldn't agree more.

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P

...

I think it is a question of balance. People might like to hear songs with which they are not familiar.

Jane Louis Wood

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A

...

At least you admit that that is a belief...

Priscilla Cullen

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C

...

Replying to Andrew Baldwin

Absolutely. Pedant that I am to me a non believer is someone who may not believe in anything. I am utterly confident in my belief, Vive la difference.

Andrew Baldwin

[19 HOURS AGO](#)

Mr C

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C Whitehead

[18 HOURS AGO](#)

M

...

Very nicely written and told - thanks Patrick

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Martin Smith

[21 HOURS AGO](#)



Dr Pete Williams of Tyndale House, Cambridge,
on the historical reliability of the Nativity
narratives:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bWaxdkvYQE

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Andrew Baldwin

19 HOURS AGO

In my son's first, and only, nativity play, he was
God. I was the Mother of God, just so you know!

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There is nowhere to go once you have
been God!

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Virginia Crook

11 HOURS AGO



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Emma Thompson

2 MINUTES AGO

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