

For antiquarian purists today is still Christmas. I know. Today, two thirds of the way through January would be the, let me see, 4th Sunday of the Christmas season. I do apologise if I'm still going on about christmas: it does take clergy most of January to recover from the trauma of having to work on a weekday. For some souls- happily few in number, Christmas doesn't end till the Feast of the presentation on the 2nd of February. This is where the superstition has arisen that if for some reason you forget to take your decorations down by Twelfth night (the end date of the slightly better acknowledged long Christmas), you must then wait till Feb 2. Why it should mean bad luck to leave your decs up I don't know: after all there can hardly be an avenging angel set aside to wreak misfortune on people who leave a bit of tinsel sellotaped to the pelmet or a circle of hell reserved for those who find a bauble behind the sofa in April. In Chinese culture although most take their New Year decorations down at the Lantern Festival, many leave them up all year in the belief that this will extend the good luck they bring (though this luck may not extend to those who have to do the dusting). Where I stand in all this is, I have to say, with most of the rest of humanity: in that although there may be something to be gained from reminding ourselves that Christmas is a *season* that starts on Dec 24th rather than one day of intense excitement and over indulgence, if you were to suggest that extending Christmas till it swallows up most of the year is a good thing, I'd suggest you've taken leave of your senses.

Despite my annual festive whining, no two ways about it Christmas *is* special it's one of the two points of the year when it's easiest to feel how close to earth heaven actually is but in purely practical terms it's just not possible to keep the excitement going for much longer than we actually do. That's not specific to Christmas, it's an unarguable fact of life. Say you decide you love eating vegan sausage rolls so much you're going to make them your entire diet from now on, it won't be long before you're thoroughly sick of what was previously your favourite food and you'll never willingly set foot in Greggs again. Sometimes short is sweet and the longer you drag something out the less it has excitement, enjoyment and meaning. All things have their use by dates and often the better things have shorter ones. We so quickly become inoculated to the new, immune to excitement, bored with brilliance and sleep through the rest of the show. Most of us are not goldfish but even the most engaged find their attention flagging, the most on the ball eventually drop off. It is an almost universal human trait not to take the long view, to turn our lives into intense sound bites, to avoid the slow and elongated in favour of the quick and intense, to privilege the now rather than think about what comes after.

For a good example, take Weddings. Now obviously, the circumstances in which I interact with most couples anticipating their nuptials is going to somewhat skew my view, but for most of those getting ready to tie the knot their attention is focused wholly on the big day and no further. It's not uncommon for the preparations to start 18 months, two years before the day, but that day is precisely as far as the focus extends. Not the day after. Or the day after that. Or 25 years down the line. Just that one day. Now I know some will harrumph triumphantly and say 'how irresponsible, marriage is not about one day it's about a lifetime' and I do occasionally have to remind an over excited Bridezilla that her special day will be over before she's noticed so it's not worth obsessing too much about the colour of the page boy's buckles, but usually it's not worth it because 1) for 90 per cent certainly of the weddings we do at St Mary's anyway the happy couple know precisely what's coming in the future because they've been living it for the last ten years at least already, to the point where there's usually children, sometimes grandchildren, and the soon to be in-laws are well into the stage of having not been talking to each other for years and 2) even if they don't realise it, what's important to the preparing couple is not really the day itself but the whole process of preparing for it. Months and years of prep and fret are not wasted when blown in a day. Months and years of prep and fret are the best part of it. Just like most of Christmas happens in the run up to December 25th, so the excitement of a wedding is in the weeks and months before. In this as in so many ways weddings hold up a mirror to our humanity- one of those fairground distorting mirrors perhaps- but like all caricatures they exaggerate the truth rather than invent it.

And what Christmas and weddings both show us is our human love of the joy of the chase, the immense satisfaction we take from knowing we're getting there, the excitement of the build up, the sense of motion, the joy of anticipation. You'd almost think that there was a streak of masochism dyed into the grain of the human psyche. When we've arrived, when we've got it in our mitts, when we've achieved our goals there's a brief period of elation and then almost always an sense of anticlimax. We've spent so much time planning for the revolution that the day after the glorious day we can't help but be disappointed. And so human lives end up geared towards that state of being where our gratification is infinitely postponed. For that part of us at least, jam tomorrow is always better than jam today.

Fast food manufacturers know this, Eastenders writers know tis, computer game designers know this, social media moguls know this, politicians know this. It's all in the expectation, and when we get it, that's it, it's on to the next. With Christmas,

that's ok because the next one will be round in another year's time; probably one needs to resist the temptation to move on with weddings.

If the joy is in the chase, the journeying rather than the arriving, the process rather than the result, that probably explain the grins to be found plastered on some Christian faces, because our faith is one where the prize is always almost in our grasp and always out of reach, hence the *Songs of Praise* rictus smile. I hasten to add grinning like the Cheshire cat on laughing gas isn't necessarily the sign of deep Christian faith: a look of intense concentration is also acceptable (this means you're super-focused on getting to the next level) as is looking thoroughly disgruntled (because you realise how far you've still got to go).

The Christian faith is not something you settle in to once and for all, it's never something that you get all in one go, and it's not something whose principle benefits you will see, for yourself at least, manifest in the here and now. The journey of faith is lifelong- which is one reason at least why we should never get too hung up on what we've always done, what we always used to do and what the church has always taught.

We're climbing Jacob's ladder, one rung at a time and we can't see the top, but maybe that's not important: being a pilgrim people isn't about where we're going it's about the fact that we *are* going, going where God is taking us and trusting him to know the way.

We're climbing Jacob's ladder but it's no ordinary ladder there's always a different way to get from one rung to the next- sometimes you just step up, other times you're stepping sideways, then you're leaping to the next, then you're pulling yourself up and then you're dancing. It's never the same way twice if you want to keep moving on.

Sometimes when a person is new to faith they find themselves frantically trying to 'get it'. They will look around at the other people in their church or group and think 'they've got it and if I try hard enough one day soon I'll get it too'. But that's not really the way it is. Those people who you think have 'got it' have simply stepped onto the dance floor a little while before you did. But we're all dancing to the same tune, and that music never ends.

At the wedding (remember those?) at Cana Jesus turned water into wine. St John's gospel says it was the first of the signs Jesus performed in front of his disciples. But only the first. The signs and wonders never stopped and indeed never will. After all the seismic signs and world changing events of Jesus' ministry that John reports, the very last words of the same gospel are these

“there are... many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

The actions of Jesus are endless and infinite: there will always be more for us to see, more for us to learn, more for us to experience. How good is that?