

Fr Hoyal Writes

CHRISTMAS: Then Now Next

Then – was it 4 BC? Almost certainly it wasn't 25 December. Then, so it is said, a virgin mother gave birth to a son in obscure and unlikely circumstances. Some historians are sceptical about those stories of a journey, an inn and a manger, of shepherds and angels and wise men. Some even doubt whether it was Bethlehem that the child was born. But there is no doubting the huge effect this child's birth turned out to have on history. For myself, I have no doubt that he was who Christians has always claimed him to be.

Now – 2008 AD we call it – some of us are preparing to celebrate that child's birthday. But there is competition, from Father Christmas, Rudolph, ardent secularists, desperate traders, insistent advertisers, Yulites, the Campaign for Real Self-Indulgence, market-oriented television scheduling. How must longer have we got?

Next – fifty years from now, say – is All Saints Clifton still a church? Do more than a handful of churches continue to function in Bristol. Does any school in England still put on nativity plays? It is legal to ring bells for worship? How many children – or adults – are baptized? How many attend worship? If you are over 60, think how amazingly things have changed in your lifetime, and then extrapolate.

This year we have been celebrating the 140th anniversary of All Saints Clifton. From Elizabeth I's time it was the custom for large boards displaying the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed and the Ten Commandments to be prominently set up in parish churches. By 1868 when All Saints was consecrated, the practice was increasingly out of fashion, and none were installed here.

But at least most children then learned the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, and many knew the Apostles' Creed too. Certainly those who attended All Saints in Richard Randall's time did. But then is not now. Most children to-day have never heard of the Apostles' Creed. Few can say the Lord's Prayer. Some have heard of the Ten Commandments but, like a lot of adults, would be hard put to naming more than one or two of them. So no room for complacency.

As I prepare to celebrate Christmas Now, I am praying about Christmas Next. I want it to be different from the scenario just outlined. I have no doubt that the faith will survive and prosper in different parts of the world. The question is: Can it do so here in 21st century Britain?

I hope so. I am praying so. For me, our great September festival celebrating our 140th anniversary was predicated on this conviction: hence the title of the festival: Then – Now - Next.

We still have everything to play for. Many churches are open and thriving. Many faithful Christians souls among us are living caring committed gospel-inspired lives. It is estimated that perhaps 3,000,000 people will attend Christmas services in Church or England churches and cathedrals. That is far from negligible, but it is barely 6 per cent of the population. And over the period of my lifetime it has to be said that virtually all the indicators have registered decline.

But it took just one holy child, one spotless mother, one wise good husband, and an unlikely handful of angel-struck hill-shepherds to make the first Christmas. They were enough. How much has flowed from that small strange hidden but incomparably holy first Christmas!

In hearts and mind let us join them. If we make being with them our number-one Christmas party priority, then, never mind all the seasonal shenanigans, few or many we shall be more than enough to honour his birth fittingly again this year.

Through the grace of the holy child our celebration will change us, and we shall change others. And next year there will be more with us, not fewer. And we shall find Next much more encouraging than we expected.

With prayers for a Holy and Happy Christmas,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Richard Hoyle".

ALL SAINTS DAY 2008

Sermon preached at All Saints on All Saints Day 1 November 2008 by Fr Bill Scott, Sub-Dean of the Chapels Royal and Domestic Chaplain to the Queen.

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I wonder what you were up to last evening! I have one particular friend who gets in a state about Halloween thinking it anti Christian. I wonder if any of you observe Halloween? The day before All Hallows' or All Saints' day has associations with strange customs many of which are thought to have originated among the ancient Druids, who believed that on that evening, Saman, the lord of the dead, called forth hosts of evil spirits. The Druids customarily lit great fires on Halloween, apparently for the purpose of warding off all these spirits. Among the ancient Celts, Halloween was the last evening of the year and was regarded as a propitious time for looking at what the future held. The Celts also believed that the spirits of the dead revisited their earthly homes on that evening. After the Romans conquered Britain, they added to Halloween features of the Roman harvest

festival held on the first of November in honour of Pomona, goddess of the fruits of trees.

The Celtic tradition of lighting fires on Halloween survived until modern times in Scotland and Wales, and the concept of ghosts and witches is still common to all Halloween observances. Traces of the Roman harvest festival survive in the custom, prevalent in both the United States and Great Britain, of playing games involving fruit, such as ducking for apples in a tub of water. Of similar origin is the use of hollowed-out pumpkins carved to resemble grotesque faces and lit by candles placed inside.

What we are celebrating today, the day after, is a far cry from these pagan observances because, although I don't share my friends neurosis about Halloween, today comes as a great contrast. We are concerned with those who have known and served God and who are instruments of light and love and not darkness and fear. We celebrate those with whom as Christians and members of the Church we are in Communion although their physical presence is not with us. We believe in the Communion of Saints.

There is a lot of talk these days about the future of the Church; much agonizing about its numerical decline, its apparent loss of influence in society, and its alleged lack of confidence in itself. When Archbishop Rowan was appointed, people said he was going to have a tough job, and so it appears he is having, poor man. Many remedies are offered. The Church must be more efficient, better organised. Its top heavy bureaucracy must be "downsized" as is said in the jargon. No doubt these and other suggestions are worthy of consideration, but they seem to have one great flaw and that is that these solutions all seem to be a very human approach - as if, literally, the Church was only a human institution dependant on human effort, human policy, human wisdom. And then I think of the words from the Beatitudes - today's gospel - "How happy are the pure in spirit; how happy are those who know their need of God." It is God's church, God is alive and at work in the world. Yes. I realise this could be the moment when I leave reality behind and take refuge in pietism or as some would call it, "transcendental irresponsibility". I am very aware of the parody on the hymn which goes:

*Sit down, O men of God.
His kingdom He will bring
Whenever he desireth it.
You cannot do a thing.*

I am not saying that new initiative, human planning and dedication are unimportant. But I think on All Saint's Day there is something more important to recognise and we all have a part to play.

There is the old story, perhaps over exposed story - I'm sorry - of the boy when asked what a Saint was remembered he had been told that the figure in a stained glass window was a saint and so he said, *A saint is someone who lets the light shine through.*

We are celebrating today that God's light can and does shine through our human weakness. We are also celebrating that what matters first and foremost is the sanctity and holiness which is God's gift and not human ingenuity or efficiency which may also be his gift, but is not enough if not lit up by him.

We are celebrating today the vast number of different types and personalities whom the Church recognises and who are not recognised and remembered who let the light shine through. They had imperfections just as we have, but they allowed God to make them holy.

Is there then a clue for the Church, for us as members of that body, as to how to let the light shine through?

I remember a holy old friar who said that there are three things common to every saint. He said these were humility, prayer and a life of sacrifice. That sounds rather terrifying to me because in none of these things can I have myself at the centre. Surely I can be a saint by being myself? Yes, by being myself, not some fantasy person -but, we can't imagine a proud saint, someone completely caught up with their own importance who thinks they are pretty spectacular. That attitude is hardly going to let God's light through. They are too busy showing off their own light.

Prayer also is a movement away from ourselves to looking at God in his wonder and loveliness. We can't imagine a prayer-less saint. Yet prayer can seem a waste of time - it would be more fun watching the television. Yet part of our Christian calling is to watch and to wait - demonstrate we believe God is worth spending time over.

A life of sacrifice may simply mean that we are willing to put ourselves out for the benefit of others, doing a good deed every day like a boy scout or girl guide or whatever they're called nowadays. The popular spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen added a further insight. For him, our biggest moral battle towards a life of sacrifice is not the struggle to choose the good, but the struggle to not choose everything else at the same time. We want the good, but we want everything else alongside it. Reflecting on his own experience, he summarizes the struggle this way: I'd like to be a great saint, but I also want to taste every sensation that sinners get to experience; I'd like to spend time alone in solitude, but I'd also want to be with friends and not miss out on anything; and I'd like to have a simple lifestyle and serve the poor, but I also want a comfortable, well-equipped home. Every choice is a painful renunciation and so choosing what's good is a complex, trying business. And it's helpful to recognize and acknowledge this, not so that we can rationalize our moral lapses, but so that we don't falsely idealize innocence. Holiness is not to be confused with being uncomplicated or sexless. It's about the proper ordering of things. Therese of Lisieux recounts an incident from her childhood. One of her older sisters was getting rid of her toys and brought them in and asked the two youngest children in the family, Therese and her sister, Celine, each to choose one, before she got rid of the rest. Celine, for her part, chose a colourful ball. Therese looked at the basket and simply said: "I choose them all! I want them all!" And we do too! That's the real struggle on the road to God and sanctity. We want it all. But that yearning is not a sign of pathology. It's a sign that we're emotionally alive, normal, healthy, and still firing on all the cylinders that God gave us.

Nevertheless, the saints call us to go on trying. They call us to build an eternal community living not only in its own strength and by its own wit, but by the will and strength of God.

News from a hydra headed monster

Early November, which I barely remember, included at least one explosion. It's not a story I can begin at the beginning, because we do not know if it began with Roland, or simply went round in circles. But wearing my Wardenly hat of Fabric Monitor, the first thing I knew was the Leak. It was on a Sunday evening, and one group had hired the Randall Room, and another had hired the Church and was performing a high powered and spiritual blue grass gig. Both groups converged on me to say that water was dripping from the lavatory ceiling. It was dripping from a lot of places, but at this time of year we all know it's leaves, don't we? And my friend Gary was coming so I forbore to panic. But by the time Gary arrived, the smell indicated not leaves and gutters but waste pipes and drains. Yuck. Floorboards up, new pipes. Sorted. Sunday morning, in nice time for the 8 am, I switch on the lights by the sacristy door and BANG!!!!!!!! Nerves hardened by Bonfire Night, I never even flinched, just found the trip switch and carried on. Another entry for my Minor Electrical List. All Quiet on the Alma Vale front until My Colleague finds we have a little friend, a house guest, a pet. He was with us a very, very short time, but the question remains: did he move his baggage upstairs because I had the floorboards up, or did we have the floorboards up because he chewed the pipework?

Changing to my Deanery Synod Growth Hat, last Wed I attended a buffet supper with praise band and slide show on Growing Leaders. I took moral support as well, as liturgically speaking I knew I was going to be an ichthus out of hydor. The chicken wings were excellent. I ate four, or possibly six. There were four hymns. The first, Be Still, is a regular at the 9 30 - nice; more anon of the fourth. The middle two were of that dishonest breed where the vocalist knows the tune but no one else does, so one has to follow half a beat behind in a half hearted shriek. The talks were mostly good and to

the point, and the point is one which we should take to heart. There are very few priests out there. There's a lot of emphasis on growing lay leaders, and they will not just lead Sunday School and outings and committees and revolts; they will lead services. Bristol is taking that new animal, the Ordained Lay Minister, very seriously. We at All Saints are lucky; indeed, we are spoilt.

And so to Up Hatherley, in my third, Ebbsfleet Lay Congress, hat. No liturgical problems here, though in passing I might point out that the Canon of the Mass was one I last heard in Latin before the Vatican II reforms clamped down. The first thing I noticed related to girth. The Wednesday group were lean and whippy and intense. The Saturday group tended to be more traditionally built, though I'm sure Friar Tuck was healthy enough in his way. Then there was the Vestment panic. The extra vestments were too late. Was it our fault? Last year we had a boot load of chasubles. Mercifully not. Then we realised that +Andrew was not in putrid puce or vivid violet, but in sober black. What about your socks, asked my companion. Black too, he replied, twitching his skirts to display his ankle. But his zucchetto was proper pink.

No PowerPoint lectures here; a straight talk from our Provincial Episcopal Visitor, mostly regarding the instability of a code of practice as a regulatory device. We've heard the arguments (click on <http://www.forwardinfaith.com/default.htm> for the definitive Fr James version) but + Andrew had a new one. He was listening to a programme about the conditions under which rabbits were bred for the table. There was concern that these conditions were less than acceptable. But unfortunately, proper conditions cannot be enforced because the situation is regulated by a code of practice. A telling point. His second concern was that, assuming he existed at all, he would in the future exist on a reservation, where he would be allowed his customs – war dance, rituals, head dress, tribal costume – but he would not be allowed to influence others by putting forward

the Catholic views of the Church of England. He would finish up in what he called 'a sexist enclave', when he wants to be part of the mainstream C of E. Master of the understatement he observed, 'This is extremely inconvenient for us.' He went on, 'What shall we do? Nothing for now.' The February House of Bishops confab may open up the discussion; we have to wait and see. He's not optimistic. He seemed pretty sure he would cross the Rubicon. But he claimed that there are brighter brains on it and he wants to make sure that there is something in place for those who stay behind. And he reminded us that our manifesto comes from Our Lord, That they all may be one ...

The laity then divided for group discussions. It was, shall we say, less moderate than the speech that went before. We were asked to consider the following possibilities (the sheet says alternatives, but you can only have two of those):

- 1 I intend to remain in the Church of England, whatever happens.
- 2 The C of E has already gone too far, so I am considering being received into the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church in the near future.
- 3 I would be interested in a 'corporate' solution in which churches under alternative provincial oversight [like All Saints] seek a closer relationship with the Holy See if that is possible.
- 4 If a corporate solution is not possible I shall (a) stay in the C of E or (b) go to Rome or Orthodoxy.
- 5 When should a decision become necessary?
- 6 In the meantime, should we register our disapproval of the way the Church has moved by eg refusing to pay parish share? Refusing to take part in Deanery or Diocesan Synods?

Fighting talk. And there were some pretty militant people there, but actually, the tone was in general moderate and open minded, reflecting our Father Bishop's own stance. Most people want to stay with the C of E. There is no need to make any sort of decision yet.

We should play our full part in our diocese, because if we do not we marginalise ourselves and ask to be sidelined and ignored. We should pay our share, because failure to do so would impact on other parishes, especially poorer parishes, and because we should be seen to be part of the mainstream church. And if we have strong views, we should write. We should write to the Bishop and to the Archbishops and to anyone one else who might one day say, ‘Well, it may be that the laity have a view, but none of them have written to *me* about it.’

Two meetings, two very different sets of people, and neither of them reflecting fully where I stand or indeed where All Saints stands. But please be aware of the connection. Our Deanery is preparing for an acute shortage of priests. Does this affect us? Yes, it jolly does. General Synod has voted for a situation in which our own clergy are threatened, where they fear that they may not be able to remain with us. We may not agree with them in re the ordination of women, that’s up to us as individuals, but we may even so think the situation is unfair or unreasonable or damaging to the Church of England. And we should keep in mind the point at which a decision will become inescapable to everyone who cannot in conscience accept a woman bishop. That’s when the All Saints family comes under threat. For myself, I should like to feel that in the long term, it’s up to us whether we exchange the kiss of peace and part or continue to respect each others principles and rub along together like any other family. Speaking of which, that fourth hymn I mentioned: the Deanery Worship finished with ‘As the deer pants for the water’ (another 9 30 gem, with a Tune). Ebbsfleet Benediction included the same hymn, a timely reminder that our family is part of a bigger family and we do have things in common with them.

In conclusion, +Andrew said, ‘Let’s not take fright.’ His sermon was to the effect that there have always been difficult days for the Church, and that we are closest to the Gospel when we face challenges. He finished the congress with two definitions of

leadership which I admit did not emerge from the Deanery meeting. One is to see where everyone is going and go and walk in front. The other is to set off and see if anyone follows.

ADVERTISEMENT

NEXT

*Saturday 20 December 2 30 pm
Christmas carols on Whiteladies
Road by St John's Church*

*December 24 5 30 pm Christmas Eve
Crib Service preceded by mince pies,
wine and squash*

*AND A HAPPY AND HOLY
CHRISTMAS TO ALL MY READERS,
LOTS OF LOVE, ANNE*

THE FESTIVAL - WE DID IT

Time will tell how far September's 140th anniversary celebrations succeed in making fuller spiritual awareness of our past encourage us to be more committed, more receptive as we look to God's future for All Saints. But what a week it was.

Over eight days we celebrated with special services, guest preachers, excellent concerts, a reception for local business-people, that splendid Victorian dinner, an exhibition of Victorian paintings, displays of vestments and ornaments, a display of photographs and documents about our history, banner-making by Young@allsaints and helpers, and a well supported artwork competition for children from local schools. It's worth another look at the official brochure to remind ourselves quite how much we packed into the festival.

For some the opening festival Mass was the highlight. For others it was Andrew's hogroast lunch with jazz or Fr Brendan's dinner, perhaps, or the joy of a full blown choral evensong, or the stupendous Christian Forshaw concert.

We must move on. Hopefully, God has been glorified and good has been done. Without mentioning names it is only right to recognize our debt to all whose skills and commitment and generosity contributed so much. Thanks are due to those who worked long and hard on festival planning and to all who worked so effectively on particular items and events in the programme. A lot of people did a lot.

Already other things have claimed our attention, and rightly so. It is time, for example, to give more consideration to areas identified in our parish growth programme. But we would do well not to lose sight of the aspiration expressed in our festival prayer:

Holy Father, send your Spirit upon us ... Teach us gratitude for all we have inherited; make us joyful in love and service to-day; and keep us receptive as we embrace your purposes for the future. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

RDH

Why I am not a member of Affirming Catholicism

Talk given by Fr James Patrick to the Bristol Branch of Affirming Catholicism, November 2008.

Well, mother always said that invitations should be accepted as soon as they arrive, even if it means missing something else you'd like to do. And if I'm honest that's happening tonight, because pretty much now, one of my closest friends is being licensed to the parishes of South Warnborough and Long Sutton as house for duty parish priest. We first met on our ABM conference over twelve years ago now, and were pretty surprised to see one another the first time we travelled to STETS, the theological ordination training course based in Salisbury. There followed weekends and summer schools there, where we spent a lot of time in the bar, laughing, and have remained friends ever since. So I am a bit sad that I'm not able to go to the licensing of the Revd Kathy O'Loughlin, as she begins her new ministry near Basingstoke.

It's understandable that she was nervous before agreeing. Clare Pipe-Wolferstan was a priest on the staff at St Mary Redcliffe, and my tutor for the ordination training course, and it can't have been easy having someone with my views as a tutee. And so we met together before she committed herself. I promised that I wouldn't try to convert her and I wouldn't try to hurt her.

That's all a bit of a preamble, because this talk is likely to touch some difficult and emotional areas, and I wanted to start by trying to assure you that anything I do say is not designed to be offensive, nor am I someone who can't get on with women – I think I can! – and I'd hope too I'm not a misogynist.

When the email from Emma Langley arrived, it really was the last thing I was expecting. Would I talk to Affirming Catholicism on why I am not a member of Affirming Catholicism. In beginning to answer the question, perhaps it's helpful to start with what I am.

I came to catholic faith in the Church of England in 1985. Before that, I was used to public school religion. I got confirmed so I could have the presents and the party. I used to attend communion regularly, but it was the singing of hymns which I missed, and which took me in the Autumn of 1985 to St Mark's Stockland Green in Birmingham. It wasn't a pretty church – it looked like my school gym – and there were statues, and vestments, and the Roman Rite (with the prayer for the Pope). As I walked out, I turned to someone and asked, "Is this Church of England?" The reply, "Oh yes" surprised me. It was all new to me. But it was right for me. It was how I felt I had to worship God. By the end of three years, I thought perhaps I should be ordained, but ordained as an NSM. After a year in London, I came to Bristol in 1989, fresh from bar school. I worshipped here for about 3 months, and because the church then wasn't very welcoming, moved to Holy Nativity Knowle, where Fr Bradley was then the Team Rector. In 1990, I gained a place in chambers, and started practising as a barrister. By 1992, Fr Keith Newton had arrived, and soon after that I became church warden, and did that job until I began training for ordination, principally on STETS, but with some residential training at St Stephen's House. It was about the only way I could get out of being church warden. I was ordained to the diaconate in the Church of God by the second

Bishop of Ebbsfleet, Michael Houghton, and to the priesthood in the Church of God by the first, Bishop John Richards, a few months after Bishop Michael's untimely death. It was over dinner at the end of the ordinands retreat that the Bishop of Swindon, Michael Doe, asked me whether I thought I should think about leaving the Church of England. Pretty much since its foundation, I've been a member of Forward in Faith. I've been Diocesan lay chairman and have also worked as part of the group of lawyers who contributed to the second part of *Consecrated Women?* That work has continued, and the group met as recently as last Friday. I've been the legal advisor to two bishops of Ebbsfleet. I've run study days for church wardens of "C" parishes to help them to deal with the bullying – and I'm afraid that's what it is – and incorrect legal advice, which archdeacons often give to parishes about to enter a vacancy. If you think I'm exaggerating, this parish was told that it would be more difficult to find a priest if resolution C was still in place, and we were also told there was no point in advertising, when in fact it generated 16 applicants.

So that's a little of who I am, and what I'm involved in. Why am I not a member of Affirming Catholicism? Well, I'm still not going to answer the question, just yet. Perhaps you'll forgive a little reflection.

This year has marked the 140th anniversary of the founding of this parish, and in September we had a festival, entitled "Then, Now, Next", and here we've reflected on the vision of our founders. The church was founded in 1868 firmly in the tradition of the Oxford movement. Unusually, it had free pews, no rents. There has been a daily mass from its foundation. And those were difficult times. This was founded in the 1860s. In the 1870s, priests like Fr Alan Tooth were sent to prison for such heinous crimes as (i.) saying mass in the eastward position, (well, I'm guilty of that) (ii.) lighted candles, (also guilty) (iii.) mixed chalice (also guilty), (iv.) vestments,

(guilty), (v.) wafer bread, (guilty) and (vi.) use of incense (also guilty). And we managed four out of the six this evening at mass here before this talk. That's the heritage of this church.

The 19th century wasn't any easier ecumenically. As you will remember, it's in 1896 that Leo XIII declared Anglican Orders invalid. So far as the Roman church was concerned, if we thought that there was a continuity with the pre-reformation church, then that was broken by the words of the ordinal which allowed him to conclude that orders were absolutely null and entirely void. That's the heritage of this church. Persecution from within, and persecution, or at least denunciation, from beyond.

But as Anglican Catholics, we know that despite the persecution and opposition, the catholic movement grew. Priests who lived the catholic life, and taught the catholic faith – often amongst tremendous deprivation – showed the Church of England what it meant to be catholic.

Of course, the 20th century saw huge change. With union between the Anglican Communion and the Old Catholic Church in 1931, Leo's declaration of absolutely null and entirely void is far more difficult to sustain. If it was lost, surely it has been found. Irregular, so far as Rome is concerned, certainly. Invalid? No. Null and void? Impossible. And there can't be a priest in the Church of England who can not trace their priestly ordination back to the Old Catholic line.

There was also the rise of the parish communion movement. Have you recently tried to find BCP Matins as the main Sunday service? Of course, it's out there, and there are some gems. But for most, when it comes to worshipping God, the main act of worship now is the Eucharist. Few churches now can't clock up at least two of the "Fr Tooth six". Ceremony that was illegal is now common place.

Few regulars raise an eyebrow at a statue, or at confession. Catholicism in the Church of England has been very successful.

So what else happened in the 20th century? The restoration of the shrine at Walsingham. The consolidation of and growth in the religious life. But there were developments in ecumenism too. We've thought about union with the old Catholics, but the second half of the twentieth century saw discussions with Methodists, and with the United Reformed Church. And of course, there was ARCIC, the Anglican and Roman Catholic conversations. Preparations began two months before I was born, and from then as we all know, the commission considered such issues as the sacraments, the relation of men and women, moral judgments, ministry and ordination, authority, the magisterium, the papacy, in the 70s, and then later it considered details of faith, authority, unity, grace, the place of Mary, and Salvation. And then in 1982, the visit to England of Pope John Paul really gave us hope that there might be reunion with Catholics.

But there was another development in the 20th century. The old order passed away. Authority in the church was no longer the sole responsibility of the Bishop. It became the responsibility of the Church Assembly, and then in 1971 the General Synod. With it a new democracy dawned. Houses of laity, of clergy, and of bishops. All debating, and all voting, making decisions, and not only decisions, but also laws.

So, perhaps you'll be wondering, what has this got to do with answering the question, why am I not a member of Affirming Catholicism. I hope it tells you three things. Firstly, that I feel God calls you where you are. Most of us never feel a damascene conversion. For most of us, our model of God is of someone who nags, someone who nags gently but persistently. We give in to God, rather than submitting completely to his will. But there are two other

things. This God who nags has called me to be a Catholic. And just as importantly, this God who nags has called me towards unity.

So against that background, I looked at the website, at what it means to be an affirming Catholic. You are, it says, “A movement of inspiration and hope in the Anglican Communion, seeking to bring together and strengthen lay and ordained people who recognize the positive, inclusive and joyful currents in the Catholic tradition of Christianity.” Well, I’ve got no problem with that, so far as it goes. But I don’t recognize just the positive, inclusive, and joyful currents. For me, just as important are the difficult bits. I’m a Catholic. That means taking Catholicism, and wrestling with it. For me, it’s about recognising and accepting that the Church and Catholicism are bigger than I am – yes – even bigger than me. And recognising that there may be a difference between what I think and want and feel, and what the church teaches. We might all want women to be ordained as bishops, for practising homosexuals to be made bishop, but we might be wrong. As Catholics, we believe in the efficacy of confession. We believe that being a catholic means not presuming on God’s mercy, and it also means that we should not assume that we know better than God. To believe in a revealed religion is to believe in a God who revealed himself in a particular place and in a particular way and at a particular time. A God who called fishermen. Who lived with the outcasts. Who spoke to the woman at the well. Who appeared first to a woman. Did he make a mistake? Was he 2,000 years too early?

Should he have come now? Should he have come in the twenty-first century? Did God get it wrong? You might in all humility think that he did. That he was confined by the times in which he chose to reveal himself. That’s your choice. But the one thing I know is that I am not prepared to say that I know better than God. For me, Catholicism isn’t about picking solely that which is positive and

inclusive and joyful in Catholicism. It's about taking the whole package, and being faithful.

So, back to the website. "We are working to make the Catholic element within Anglicanism a positive force for the Gospel and a model for effective mission today." Again, no problem there. Then "As reformed and reforming Catholics, we seek to renew the universal Church by including those with different perspectives and bearing witness in the world to Christ's healing and reconciling love." Again, no problem. Inclusivity is good.

I was very glad too to read about what you value: regular prayer, study and worship to nurture personal growth and equip us to be Christ's apostles in the world. Commitment to the social and ethical transformation of the world. A living catholic tradition to carry the gifts of the past into the future. Models of love, friendship and community for all seeking to follow the gospel, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, disability or sexual orientation. Diversity and freedom of conscience within the community of faith. Liturgy to inspire holiness and relate the greatness of God to people today.

Then your aims: to resource people to grow in the faith, in order to help them respond to contemporary society's spiritual hunger and thirst for justice; inform and influence debates in the Church by helping people to engage in the underlying theological issues.

It's all good stuff. The gospel is radical and reforming. The church should reach out to all, and especially to the marginalised. We should be a Magnificat people, heirs of a master who over-turned the tables in the temple, who ate with sinners, who condemned those who condemn, who fed the hungry and healed the sick, and who freed the prisoner. It's all good stuff, but to this Catholic, if you'll forgive me, it seems a bit light.

It seems light, because there is more to Catholicism than this. It's light on the sacraments. In them we become members of the body of Christ. Through them we are fed and nurtured, and become more perfectly the body of Christ. The gifts of God for the people of God. And they are his gift. Baptism, confirmation, holy communion, penance marriage, unction, and holy order are all his gift. For me, if they are God's gift, then we don't alter them or change them. At least, if we do, then we do it together. Perhaps you spotted something earlier. I mentioned earlier that I'd been ordained a deacon and a priest, not in the diocese of Bristol, not in the Church of England, not in the Anglican communion or tradition, but in the Church of God. The whole church. It's the gift of the whole church, and if that's the case, it's not ours to muck about with. If there is to be change, then it should be the church together considering it, and debating it, and testing it. We don't move at different rates. That's not Catholicism. That's ultimately congregationalism, though perhaps writ large. Of course, we want to be open and inclusive. But there is a difference between being open, and inclusive, and changing everything we don't like. Perhaps even throwing the baby out with the bath water. (Clichés? I like to think I avoid them like the plague.)

But there's another area where it is light, and that is ecumenism. In his high priestly prayer in John's Gospel, Christ prays that his church may be one as he and the Father are one. For all of us, Christian unity should be a priority. But as Catholics, surely the priority for us should be reunion with our mother church, the church from which we claim to derive our orders. Reunion with our own daughter, (perhaps I should say, younger sister) the Methodists, or other protestant churches is one thing, but we are a branch cut from the tree that is the Roman Catholic Church. For me, that is the first and most important expression of ecumenism, and it is to that aim that we should be working. After all, union of all Christians must inevitably mean union with Rome. Of course, God calls us where we are. Of course

God calls us to an ecclesial solution: the alternative is individual submission, individual conversion. But for me that must be the direction of travel. Anything that hinders that path, that route, is a move away from unity, and is therefore a move contrary to the prayer of Christ.

So what am I trying to say? I suppose I'm trying to say in this is that I'm a sinner on a journey. God has showed me the glory of Catholicism, and it's true. There are bits that I don't like. There are bits that are difficult. There are bits that are tough, and challenging. Are they wrong? I don't know. I'm not enough of a scholar, not enough of a theologian to know. I don't pretend to know better than God. If there is to be change, then change can't come about simply through a debate in a provincial synod, in part of a communion, in part of a church in part of the united Kingdom. To be a catholic means to be committed to unity. That's what we should be moving towards, and we should do nothing that obstructs or takes us away from that path. It's odd. I know people say it of me, and I sometimes say it of myself – Oh, I'm against this, or not in favour of that. It sounds so negative. Because in fact, I'm not against much, and I'm in favour of a great deal. I'm in favour of God, a God of three persons. I'm in favour of his Word. I'm in favour of his spirit. I'm in favour of his Church. I'm in favour of Catholicism, and I'm in favour of a church that understands its radical mission to the whole world, especially to the marginalised. Of course, I want to Affirm Catholicism. For me, Affirming Catholicism doesn't go far enough.

IN THIS MONTH ... DECEMBER 1982

CHRISTMAS PAST IN BRISTOL

By Elizabeth Ralph

Robert Ricart, Town Clerk of Bristol about 1480, refers to the annual custom of appointing a "Lord of Misrule" whose function it was to entertain at Christmastide, and who held office from the eve of All Hallows until Candlemass, during which time plays were produced by the "Mummers". As Christmas drew near, aware of the religious significance of the festival, the Mayor of Bristol made a proclamation on the market day before Christmas in the following words:

"The Mayor and Sheriff charge and command on the King our Sovereign Lord's behalf that no manner of persons at no time this Christmas go a-mumming with closed visage, nor go after curfew is rung at St Nicholas without a light in his hands, that is to say, a sconce, lantern candle or torch; and that he go in no wise with weapon defensibly arrayed, whereby the king's peace is in anywise broken."

If secular society had its peculiar customs at Christmastide, like the Lord of Misrule, the church had an equally curious one in the ceremony of the Boy Bishop who was elected on the Feast of St Nicholas (December 6th) and held office until that of Holy Innocents. Arrayed in his Episcopal robes he would celebrate the Mass and preach sermons prepared for him. Robert Ricart tells us that "on Seynt Nicholas Eve, yn semblable wyse the Maire, and Shiref and their brethren to walke to Seynt Nicholas Church, there to hire their even-song; and on the morowe to hire their Mass, and hire the bishop's sermon, and have his blessing; and after the dyner, the seide Maire, Shiref and their brethren to assemble at the Maire's Counter (Council House) there waytyng the Bishoppe's coming

plying the mean whiles at dyce, the Town clerke to fynde them dyce, and to have 1d of every Raphill, and when the Bishoppe is come there and given them his blissyng, he to be served there with brede and wyne.” The custom was forbidden by Henry VIII in 1542 and after a temporary revival in Queen Mary’s reign, was finally abolished in the time of Elizabeth I.

The immediate effect of the Reformation upon these Christmas customs was so slight as to be hard to discern. The Puritans under Oliver Cromwell, however, objected to many of these Christmas celebrations and to the excesses, such as playing, acting, gambling and dancing. There has probably been no stranger episode in the long history of Christmas than the attempt to suppress both the religious and secular celebrations than during the period 1644 to 1659.

By a Parliamentary decree, Christmas Day was appointed as a national Fast and mince pies, plum puddings and family festivities were suppressed. As might be expected there were popular uprisings against the Puritan ban. With the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II, the old yuletide customs gradually re-appeared, but never became as extravagant as in the time of the Tudors.

Then, as now, the churches at Christmas time were decorated with boughs of holly and bay, but not flowers. In 1540, the churchwardens of several of the city churches were buying pounds of tallow candles, frankincense and oil for the lamps. The bells of all the churches rang out on Christmas Eve.

A tangible expression of good will was the Christmas dole. Originally the founders of the dole provided that it be given to those who attended church on Christmas morning and afterward to have Christmas dinner. Later the gifts were made in fuel or food.