

In just two days time it will be twenty years since the X factor– the TV singing talent show– first appeared on our screens. Now the programme has long since faded from the collective consciousness, finally put out of its misery in 2019, the whole shebang as forgotten as the shows winners. Few will bemoan its loss, though in its favour it did used to provide us with Christmas number ones, which were awful, but nothing like the indescribable awfulness of Ladbaby who have made the seasonal top spot their property for a number of years. Possibly because only three people still buy singles. Anyway, all we are left of the phenomenon that was X Factor is Rylan’s ubiquitous presence on the small screen and the faint echoes of the catchphrases ringing in our ears...

'You nailed it!'

'You look like a pop star' '

You took it and made it your own!'

'110 per cent, yes'

'You don't realise how good you are!'

Only the last of these oft-repeated tag lines was sometimes actually true. There *could* be astonishing voices hidden behind the least unlikely looking of persons.

Over a dozen or so years the producers of the X Factor have grown very good at confounding the expectations of your first impressions: building up the expectation of the guy who looks like he can top the charts yet opens his mouth to prove he's tone deaf, or the Norfolk lass whose day job involves pulling the innards out of Bernard Matthews turkeys and whose singing voice is pure gold. A particularly memorable year final featured a prison officer who, how shall we put it, wouldn't have been left short at work if she ever needed to throw her weight around pitched against a Glaswegian schoolboy who looked like his diet since weaning had been haggis and deep-fried mars bars and yet hidden beneath these unpromising exteriors lay the larynx of a diva and the voice of an angel, albeit one that could only deliver God's messages to Rab C Nesbit.

Very often something remarkable is there, hidden right under our noses, unsuspected, unacknowledged: we never think to bother to find out, we never look

very closely at what is always there. So much more is hidden just below the surface that we ever knew: we thought this was all there is, when in fact this is just the tiniest sprinkling of dust on the crust of the world. Occasionally, something as crass and tacky as the X Factor can show us that.

The year just gone, it has to be said, it has been especially difficult to see anything below the surface so distracting has that surface been. Evil is certainly abroad in the world. That said, evil has long been abroad in the world. Christianity has never shirked from saying that but somehow this last year it seems to be being a bit more open about its presence in our lives. If the lights haven't quite gone out around the world, there are still some hands hovering uncomfortably close to the switches.

It could be overwhelming, but remarkably our faith could help us keep us out of the slough of despond and among the many things as Christians we could say, here, I think are two of the more helpful ones.

First, we can remind ourselves that whatever our fears and worries history does not repeat itself. The tide of human affairs is not a circle and although fortune may ride a wheel, the passing of time can only ever be linear. There has never been a Hundred Years War part 2 or the second battle of Hastings. Whatever happened in your past: if past times were good for you or bad; if perhaps they were not better or worse, just simpler times, they will not come back. It is not possible, ever, to return things to how they were. If you turn the hands of your clock back, you don't get the hours of your life back: if you change the date on your calendar to 1970 it's still 2023 and still nobody thinks Bernard Manning is funny anymore.

Whatever is happening now is similar, but different. 2023 is not the 1930s, though there are of course many warnings from that era and many lessons to be learned.

As Christians we believe that rather moving in ever more pointless circles, history has a direction: it is linear and though at times that line may seem to be angled sharply down and at others more optimistically upwards, history has a direction, a purpose and a direction: God's. However dark it may become in future years, God's purposes will triumph.

The second thing we can say is to point out that despite the jackboots of malice that have stomped all over the news in 2023 all sorts of hopeful, optimistic and just plain good things also happened last year.

Here's a random selection.

There was a coronation this year. Ho hum, you may say, I would anyway, but it did feature a King and Queen who had both been through divorce, life events that 90 odd years ago prevented a King from being crowned. In 2023 that didn't figure: we've grown up that much.

The Beatles hit number one again, with their very last song, fifty-four years after their last hit the top spot. Even if you don't like that particular beat combo there is a satisfying symmetry to the success of their swan song.

Closer to home there were a dozen+ baptisms at St Mary's church last year. If there was but one it would be a cause for joy, but many more and our font overfloweth.

Also at St Mary's James and Bronwyn, to pick a couple at random (honest) tied the nuptial knot just down there just a few feet away and in one of our sister Anglican churches just over the border in Scotland, David and Steve were married. From our own congregation Euan and Emilio got engaged. It's won't happen in time for them, but some year in the future two men will legally get hitched St Mary's and the first woman will walk down the aisle to marry her bride.

Also in 2023 the General Synod of the church of England finally voted to give some crumbs to its LGBT siblings. Not much, but hopeful nonetheless. Perhaps in a hundred years time we might get a cake.

A short random list, then, of people and events determined to keep the lights on. And behind them we can see God's hand.

Despite frequent appearances to the contrary, Christianity is a very, very optimistic faith. We believe in a God who is Love, a God in whom there is no darkness, a God whose light can never be turned off, a God whose Love infuses the whole of his creation. If we do nothing else in these troubled times we can help our brothers and sisters to say, you know, we *are* better than we knew.

This church is a special place: it is a place where holy things happen. But here's a secret: holy things happen everywhere. Everywhere. In the front of the church, in the middle and the back. Outside in Church road and on Croydon Road; and on and out;

in the living rooms and kitchens and bathrooms and bedrooms of a billion and a half homes around the world; in churches and chapels and synagogues and temples and mosques; in fields and factories and offices; on and in the lakes and rivers and seas and oceans; in the skies and beyond to the outer reaches of infinite space.

Back beyond the big bang God created everything: God made it, he saw that it was good: he made it holy. Then two thousand or so years ago, God was incarnate, God visibly came into his world as part of it, and so now we can know that everything can be holy. That's is the gift the Christian faith gives to the world: it lets us see the holiness around us and the potential Christ child in everyone.

The holiness is there already. Every day in every year in every single one of 7 billion plus lives including yours and even mine God is already there, holiness surrounds us, without and within. It is not always easy to see that, sometimes it is impossible, very often we need help, special places, special words, specials actions in order for us to be able to perceive the presence of God in which we live and move and have our being.

Perhaps that is why there is something particularly right about being on the cusp of a New Year, as we are today, consciously in the presence of God, bringing to him our thanksgivings and hopes, our fears and anxieties, our burdens and our joys. Whatever it brings, the year to come, 2024 is holy already. So let us pray today that God will grant us the perseverance in the year ahead; indeed, for what left of our lives to keep scrubbing at the glass, peeling back the layers that obscure our vision, each day discovering a little more of the holiness that surrounds us.