

No church is perfect. In the years I've spent in the pews or behind the altar, I've been greeted over-profusely or coldly ignored: I've had to shake hands at the peace with an entire congregation of 200 or nobody shook my hand because I wasn't from the village and you might catch something from a stranger. I've been made to feel like a visiting celebrity just because I mentioned I'd travelled up from London and been made to feel like a complete criminal just for asking where the toilet is. I've sat in a low mass with a priest and two others: one person anticipating the responses half a second early, me saying them at a typical speed and the third person echoing them half a second after me. The Lord Be with You. A-a-and-d-d W-w-wit-thh y-y-y-our-r-r S-s-s-pirit-t-t.

I've seen a confirmation service where a member of the congregation saw the Bishop's big chair at the front, decided it was for him and couldn't be budged from it for the whole service; I visited a parish that was cock-a-hoop about getting its first transgender member and another where they were proud as punch with their pew ends and given half the chance would take up your entire day talking about previous incumbents.

I've heard more than one choir whose ability to sing is inversely proportional to the silliness of their costumes- big hats, terrible pitching; heard the Bible shouted, mumbled, chanted and declaimed; read as if it is a children's story, the ten o'clock news or Play for Today and on one unforgettable occasion in the style of Hannibal Lecter. Last I heard he'd been made an archdeacon in London diocese. Says it all really. All churches that have children have noisy children; one in Suffolk had a toddler who ran up to the pulpit and started laughing at the preacher. And he kept laughing. And laughing, till the whole church was in stitches. Happily I perform that function at St Mary's: you don't always play along, but I try.

Visiting a church, I've made the mistake more times than I can mention of sitting in the handy vacant pew only to discover the reason that nobody is sat in it, despite its prime position is that it's in fact the pew in front of the person who sings everything a semitone sharp and whose volume control is stuck at eleven (that was Ipswich). Or it might be the seat next to the tambourine player (that was Taipei). Or the person who thinks soap was invented by Satan and washing is for sissies (Crouch End- yes, that's where John the Baptist ended up. Elvis in Birmingham, John in North London). True I haven't willingly sat in many evangelical churches, but, despite the corporate sheen of their web sites, the few I have graced with my presence don't break the mould.

We're an advertising executive's worst nightmare.

Go to enough churches and if you didn't know better, you might start to think that the main reason church attendance is plummeting is the people who already go.

Church should be the place where you see the reflection of heavenly perfection, and instead, look at what you get.

Church is the place where you should be 'proper': you dress proper, you act proper, you talk proper, even if you can't do your grammar properly. And look at what you get.

Church would be alright if it was full of clean, quiet, competent, controlled, tuneful, polite people just like me: and look at what you get.

If you look at the Church of England web site it does look a bit like church is like that; if, that is, your idea of heaven is mostly white twentysomethings posing for a toothpaste advert.

It isn't, of course.

"Go" says Jesus *"and make disciples of all nations"*

Take note: this is an open door policy: Rishi Sunak would not approve. Make disciples of all nations: not just the good ones, the ones that will make us look good, the ones who we like, the ones who are like us, the ones who are useful to us, the young ones, the attractive ones, the rich ones.

Everybody. Warts and all.

The Gospel we proclaim is good news for all.

If we are disappointed when what we find in church is not heavenly perfection, then it might be that we haven't quite understood what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Yes, there there are the choirs of angels, the congregation of saints, sweet singing and clouds of incense. And also the smelly people, the annoying ones and the irritating ones; the bores and the bad readers, the hostile and the overbearing; those who

defend their personal pew more ferociously than an X L Bully with a bone; those who sit in the bishop's chair, and say the wrong responses and sing out of tune at the top of their voices. And of course because, unless we change and become like children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven, lots and lots of little children running amok and standing in front of the pulpit laughing. On the throne, the Lamb, laughing too.

The Kingdom of Heaven is the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. The folding star shines in the sky, the gathering time has come. And there is no sheep that is the wrong colour or the wrong shape for the fold. There is no sheep that is too puny or too stubborn or too refractory. There is no sheep that loves the wrong way- how can love be wrong? There is none too old or too young that the shepherd will not abandon everything to search for it. The sick and the strong; those heavy with lambs, those with none; the eager and the stragglers— he knows them and they know his voice. If we here are to be a glimmer of the light of heaven on this dark earth then that too is what we will have to be like.

The House of God is not a house of correction, it is the house of Love.

It can seem impossibly hard to see Jesus in his brothers and sisters, to see Christ in other people. But that doesn't mean he isn't there. If we can't see him, perhaps we don't know how to look. But he is there. He is with us always: to the end of the age. We are not searching for diamonds in the mud; we are cutting and polishing every single rock, because we know already that it is a diamond.

All sheep are different, and all sheep are valuable. Sometimes only the shepherd can see that.

Sometimes sheep get lost. Sometimes they cause the shepherd endless trouble, sometimes they vex the other sheep in the flock no end. But no sheep is the wrong sheep.

An endless variety of sheep, but one flock, one fold, one Good shepherd.