

It's not always possible to know how something is going to end just by looking at the beginning of it. All babies, for example, start their life looking like Winston Churchill; happily almost all of them grow out of it; unhappily some go on to look like Jeremy Clarkson. But most don't. Lucky for me and you.

Though most of us guessed Boris Johnson's premiership was going to end messily, nobody knew in advance quite what it would be that would topple the would-be world king. Certainly nobody in their wildest nightmares had predicted what the Conservative party would do next. Sorry, it's Christmas, that's the end of politics from this pulpit. Till next year. Where were we?

Who would have thought that bundle of fluffy cute joy that is a kitten will end up the indifferent, vain, scornful, spiteful creature that is a cat? We realise too late, of course: by the time the adult feline arrives we're hopelessly hooked and wrapped around it's little retractable claws.

This sermon: you've no idea where it will end up, though you hope and pray that it will end: trust me, it will, in oh, about 90 minutes. OK, a lot less than that, but it will feel like an hour and a half. There will be a sense of great achievement, the feeling of having come through an epic trial when it ends and a great shared feeling of *blitz esprit de corps* with your fellow worshippers. But how it will end... who can say? Not even my churchwarden.

Things don't end the way they start. An acorn does not resemble a mighty oak and nor does an omlette look like an egg. From a mess of ingredients emerges a cake, from a mixture of rocks, glue and lead pellets comes a Christmas pudding. From inauspicious beginnings great things can grow and conversely bang to whimper many an explosive opening ends with a sad fizzle. But it's Christmas, so let's stick with the beginnings with happy endings.

Like St Mary's choir. Not only does it provide the church in the park worshippers with a passable simulacrum of the angelic chorus, it provides its choristers with the opportunity to develop their skills, broaden their repertoire, sharpen their critical musicological skills—you should hear the invective if they're singing something they don't like—and most important to any musician the choir provides money. Many musician's first paid gig is St Mary's Choir. Jeff Beck for instance. Who'd have guessed where that chorister would end up, and even less plausible, where the rock star would? Not everybody has the luck of being born within the sound of Beddington bells, so making cash out of singing sweetly and looking angelic is only within the

grasp of the chosen few. Some have to take their first steps into moneyed minstrelry in different ways.

At the age of 17, my first occasion of being paid for my musical skills, was playing the organ in a pub on a council estate in Leeds... for a drag act. You see, I told you you had no idea where this sermon was headed.

I peaked early. Twelve years of violin lessons paid off in the end. As many of the choir know, I'm the poor man's Les Dawson when it comes to the ivories- all the wrong notes in the wrong order and none of the comedy. Still, bad as I was, I was at least perfectly matched with the drag act which married the visual appeal of Divine with a repertoire of homophobic jokes aimed at him/herself. Such delights passed as a class act in West Yorkshire in the 1980s, which means it was bad. More humiliating, I only got the job because his sister had taken a shine to me, little knowing that how ever loudly she barked, this would forever be the wrong tree.

No children were involved, apart from myself in today's definitions, and it certainly did me no harm, at least no more harm than growing up in Leeds in the 1970s, and that harm had already been done.

Luckily for me, things don't end up the way they start, and instead of dying of degenerative pulmonary disease at the age of forty-three after a lifetime playing in smokey Northern working mens's clubs, here I am. As I said, lucky for me, less so for you.

Things don't end the way they start. From the grim north to the beautiful south, from dodgy light entertainment to dubious liturgy it's hard to tell where things will end when you're just setting off.

Particularly tonight.

Tonight, we are right at the start.

Of what?

For liturgical literalists it's *Christmas* that starts tonight. Sundown December 24th is when it officially kicks off rather than the day after Bonfire Night. That's when the first Christmas lights appeared in Beddington. For purists though, the festive season

started about 6 hours ago — only six hours in and already exhausted! Buckle up there's at least twelve days of merriment to go. Ho ho ho. Anyway, that is not the answer, in this church our liturgical purity has long gone the way of every other kind. No, it's something bigger than that starting tonight, something a tad more important than when you properly pack away the purple and get to glittering.

What is starting tonight?

Everything.

Not that anybody realised it at the time. Despite some rather obvious in your face written in letters twelve feet high do I have to literally spell it out would you like it with pictures clues. Despite that.

Nobody saw what was coming.

And you wouldn't have either. No you wouldn't.

We're in a stable. Not a posh palace paddock for pampered equestrians, but basically the yard of a dodgy pub (one of those again) in an unpleasant provincial backwater (one of *those* again). There's a rather too young peasant woman and an older man with a carpenter's callused hands and they're gazing in rapture at... the feeding trough. I guess there's not much more interesting to do before someone invents the telly. No, wait! There's something moving in there: a baby, aw, cute; a baby boy, oh well, you can't have everything. Suddenly there's a strong musky animal smell. I know we're in a stable but this is the advance warning of the arrival of... a group of shepherds. Why are they barging in here? The inn's that way mate. But no, they're not looking for the taproom, they're here to see the baby. Muttering something about angels arriving with instructions while they were doing the laundry. Guess they found the bar a few hours earlier then. Still nice of them to come to wish the couple well. Off they toddle and it's not long before we hear the sound of someone coughing. That's because they can see what the next set of visitors are carrying— some people just have to catch sight of incense and off they go. Into the stable come three chaps, somewhat more agreeably aromatic than the last lot and you'd say they were dressed up like Christmas trees if it wasn't 1900 years before Prince Albert has his brainwave. Gifts are given: gold, frankincense, myrrh; erm, thanks, some outlandish claims of moving stars are made and none too subtle hints of royal connexions and off they go.

And... apart from a detour into Egypt, that's it for another thirty or so years.

We're in at the birth, we're there at the start of a life and what an odd birth it's been and what an odd life it will be.

But

Would you have known where this was going to end had you been there at the start? Of course not. Not even with the angelic nudges and the magi's hints. You're not that smart. None of us are.

But had we been there, we would have been there at the birth of a new world. There at the birth that changed it all. There at the start... of everything.

Sometimes people when asked what they want for Christmas will say 'a surprise.' Obviously, nobody at the first Christmas said it. But, boy, did we get it.