

December. De-Cem-Ber. Those three syllables that spell out excitement and joy: opening the first windows on the advent calendar, the letter box clattering with the first christmas cards of the year ; decorating the tree; tinsel and lights; nativity plays and crib services, Santa hats and reindeer antlers; sleigh bells and carol singing, De-Cem-Ber. Frosty the snowman, chestnuts roasting on an open fire, ding dong merrily on high, deck the halls with boughs of holly. See, you feel happy just thinking about it.

But in the interest of balance, let's indulge our inner puritan for a moment and say, De-Cem-Ber. Those three syllables that speak of never completed shopping lists at supermarkets crowded from dawn to dusk and beyond; of fights over hen's teeth parking spaces and Disneyland checkout queues. Panic buying because the shops will close for a day. Cards to be written and stamps to be bought just when each post office branch is competing to get into the Guinness book of records for the world's longest queue.

The decades-long family sulks and vendettas danced to the ever-popular tunes of not sending a christmas card, can't come this year and what sort of present is that? Gridlocked roads, standing room only trains and buses that sail straight by. Bulging waistlines and shrinking wallets. Slade and Cliff Richard.

But, hey! Don't let me get you onto a December downer, because it could be worse. De-Cem-Ber might bring you stress, anxiety and exhaustion but you can at least rejoice with for me. Because this year after a pandemic-imposed haitus primary school visits are resuming tomorrow! It's usually Year Two, but because of lockdowns we've got three and four. My cup runnueth over. Visiting children are always adorable, right down to the last running nose, and although it's very nice that they have their own homes to go to, I do like children and children's ministry. When the kids visit to find out what church is about I can dress up like a christmas tree and run about ringing bells and indulge in all manner of silliness... no hold on, that's just a normal Sunday. But, school visit, usual pattern, I show them the glitz and the glamour of Anglican worship, so far so good and then...

And then the mask was peels away to reveal the monster beneath; then the idyll becomes a nightmare; then the innocent smile became a knowing sneer; because at the end comes the time they are allowed to ask questions.

Some of the questions, it must be admitted, are easy. They wouldn't tax even the sleepest of priests.

'What day do you come to Church?'

Sunday: I have the rest of the week off.

'Why do you always wear black?'

Because it's cool. And slimming.

'Do you live in here?'

Yes. Could you just move that way a bit, you're blocking my view of the telly.

So far so good. Nobody's going to lose sleep over any of those queries, parried away with Andy Murray ease. But some of the questions are harder, less amenable to flippant answers. Some I have learned to anticipate over the years, but there are some questions that are very difficult to answer for any age group, never mind answering them in a way a child might grasp, and it is those which constitute the sting in the tail of the school visit to church. I suppose I could just cop out, be patronising and dole out platitudes, but what's the point in that? So what should we answer to:

What happens to people when they die? What do you do to help people? Why did they kill Jesus? Why do people come here? Why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Children can ask really difficult questions in Church.

You might be tempted to try to turn the tables, to give them a taste of their own medicine, have them walk a mile in your shoes and ask the children a question yourself. Don't bother. They always know the right answer. Without fail. They might have watched you stumbling, stuttering and floundering when they ask you what St Joseph's mother was called, but ask them to fill your boots and they'll pull it off with aplomb. Ask something back and with cool confidence the child on the end of every hand that shoots up will know with absolute certainty and without hesitation what the answer to any question you might ask is. All school children know that the answer to any religious question is... 'Jesus.'

It's a cliché, I know, the child who answers 'Jesus!' to every question, but after you've seen it the hundredth time, you know it's true.

And as sure as kittens become cats, little humans grow to become bigger humans. As we grow older we sort of know the answer is more complicated, perhaps more nuanced and yet for those of us who hold to some sort of belief, we can still share the absolute certainty of our faith. We know that although the answer is more complex than we once thought, the answer is still there, plain and clear and certain. We have the scriptures, we have the 39 articles, we have, most certain of all, the teachings of the church. Challenge our faith, ask us a question and we'll slap you right back with one of those. Any question you lob at us will bounce right back, ricocheting off the rock of our religion. That is what faith is all about.

Except, like the phrases 'military intelligence', 'caring conservatism' and 'adult male', 'religious certainty' is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. The more rigid your faith is, the thinner it is; the more certain you are that you know God's will, the further away from it you are.

The pillars of our faith are great comforts, irreplaceable guides, and yet I guarantee you that, some of what we believe right now is wrong. And the teaching of the church contains some answers that are right right now but weren't right 100 years ago and won't be right in 20 years time. Even the scriptures can give us different answers in different ages, the accents of their voices change over the millennia, those things that seem fixed, clear, immovable and irrevocable, crumble to dust at the tiniest breath of a fresh breeze.

We don't have, never have had, and never will have all the answers. If we don't ask questions we won't learn, we will not come closer to God, we will not have a lively, living, heartbeat of faith. What we will have is a habit, the religious habit.

In Advent our Gospels introduce us to the biblical character you'd least want to be stuck in a broken down lift with, John the Baptist. Listen to the scorn he reserved for those who have the habit of religious certainty.

*[John the Baptist] saw a number of Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he said to them, 'Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming?'*

There are two ways of translating the Bible: word for word and thought for thought: I guess 'brood of vipers' is word for word: thought for thought the translation would be... unrepeatable in church. Here are the Saducees and the Pharisees, respectively the great and the good of the ancient Jewish world; confident, certain in the knowledge that Abraham is their ancestor and therefore they are right. And what does John the Baptist say? Abraham? So what? Do you think that makes you right? That just means you've got the habit. Turn again, open your eyes, don't settle for what you think you've already got.

God is like nothing else at all in our experience. We might find it easiest to try to understand him as a person, but we could equally with think of him, or her, as a verb, as action, movement, change.

Children know instinctively that the answer to any religious question is 'Jesus'. And you know what, they're not wrong. The answer is Jesus. But if you think you can contain Jesus in the pages of a book, if you think you can nail Jesus down, think again. Jesus also is a verb. He is our rock; he is also a hurricane.

*He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and [with] fire*

The answer is Jesus. And after 2000 years, we're only just starting to scratch the surface of what that means.