

Well we're now deep into nativity play season: almost half way through the cosmetic treat adult advent calendar and though lots of schools are eschewing the joys, lots aren't so it's almost inescapable. Don't be overwhelmed: it's only going to get worse- soon we will be at near saturation point of that endearing and sentimental, teeth-grindingly saccharine and wholly unrealistic seasonal song.

Just the one song: not Slade's *Merry Xmas Everybody*, not Wizzard's *I wish it could be Christmas Every Day*, not Boney M's *Mary's Boy Ch-* you see it's not just Cliff Richard who serves up seasonal slops, even if he has spewed out more than most. No it's the song with more season stretching stamina than all the rest put together, the song that looks witheringly at *White Christmas* and sneers, 'wimp!' WE are, of course, talking about the hoodlum in the holiday hood, *Away in a Manger*.

Don't get me wrong: we'll be starting to fulfil our quotient of renditions this week at St Mary's and I'm not dissing the ditty - no Christmas would be truly Christmas without that tune; sung at a crib service it never fails to bring a lump to the throat- or should that be a tear to the eye. When a score of tuneless toddlers ask God to bless all the dear children in his tender care who could fail to be moved to the very bowels of their being? I'm all choked up just thinking about it. If you don't agree, well, tough: for the next two weeks the song is everywhere: get used to it.

Of all the multitude of renditions of *Away in a Manger* produced each Christmas a declining few manage to croon the tune past the first verse, which is a shame as in verse two the song proposes some of the most implausible, troublesome and possibly heretical theology ever to make its way into an Anglican hymnal. Given the highly suspect stuff that's smeared on the pages of our songsheets, that's really saying something.

So what, you might be thinking, is he on about now? Why is the Rector crying heresy at that harmless children's carol?

What it is is that line that must have raised eyebrows or possibly unrealistic hopes in parents for at least a century now when we sing:

*The cattle are lowing; the baby awakes;
but little Lord Jesus; no crying he makes.*

Really? Are you sure it's a baby you've got in the manger there? The whole crux of Christmas is that God was incarnate as a human, and all human babies cry. There may on occasion be a medical or developmental reason why babies don't let vocal rip, but all going to plan, they cry. And cry. And then some. They cry in order to communicate: it's about the only means they have- it's a crude but effective way of getting attention.

I have no children, so I can't claim knowledge from experience, apart from baby sitting my nephew who though he is now a much admired tenor was then a ear-

splitting super-soprano. So, I can't claim the experience of sleepless nights and routinely shattered eardrums, but come on. If your kids didn't cry wouldn't you be just a bit worried? After you got over the relief and made up for all that lost sleep, wouldn't you be just a tiny bit worried? if your baby turned out that perfect? Started wondering if that bloke you think was the sire is the father after all?

If you think I'm being perhaps a tad unseasonably Scroogelike here, well I apologise, but there's a little more to come of this preemptive strike on the carolling ditties that will be delighting us this Adventmas season. The fact that supermarkets pipe carols across their stores as well as 70s glam rock hits means there's always the risk of being pitched straight into a 3rd century Christological controversy right in the frozen vegetables aisle. If you're me that is.

So, away from the manger, there's an even more implausible line courtesy of that immortal factory of the improbable Cecil Frances Alexander, she of daily gathering purple headed rushes on green hills without walls. Mrs Alexander's addition to the Christmas canon which, alongside its unfortunate last verse reference to A&E on New Year's Eve, contains the frankly astonishing line:

Christian children all must be, mild, obedient, good as he

As a sort of wish list, well, maybe, even if it does make her sound a bit like an advert for Fairy Liquid. I'd love my baby to be mild, obedient and good. As a wish list, yes. But...

Christian children all must be, mild, obedient, good as he

has at least two big problems. The most obvious one might be hinted at in the following phrase:

“Are you saying our Sunday School ain't Christian?”

Clearly, if Christian children *must* – not, it would be great if they were, or ideally should be, or even if just once, just one time they could be, but *must* be mild, obedient and good- If Christian children *must* be mild, obedient and good: then clearly there aren't any Christian children anywhere unless 'must' means, occasionally or temporarily might be. That's the most obvious issue.

The second is that

‘Christian children all must be, mild, obedient, good as he’

does sort of give the impression that Jesus, as a child, always was. Which leaves us to assume that he wasn't being even slightly disobedient when he disappeared that day aged twelve sending his parents into paroxysms of panic. It leaves us to assume that

Mary and Joseph had never said to him 'don't wander away on your own' or 'always stay where we can see you' or 'make sure you stick with Uncle Jehoiakim' unless you fancy staying behind in the Temple a couple of days without letting us know first. Do you think they didn't?

Christians- adults and children- all should be obedient to God. That, Jesus was, to the point of the Cross. But when humans are involved, sometimes disobedience is the *right* thing to do, even when you are a child. Happily it's rare, but occasionally adults will exploit even a child's propensity to obedience in grotesque ways. Sometimes it's right to refuse to obey.

Disobedience is not always a sin: sometimes it is a moral imperative, because sometimes human authorities- be it parents or Sadducees or Herod or governments or bishops- will demand that you are obedient to them and not to God. In which case, like Jesus, you must be disobedient.

The whole crux of Christmas is that God was incarnate as a human. Jesus is, so the teaching of the church has it's fully human. Which means, he's just like us, but without sin. Crying, despite what a sleep deprived ear terrorised parent might start to wonder- is not sin.

So. St Mary's Carol Sheet: Revised line:
the cattle are lowing, the baby awakes
and little Lord Jesus, screams.

If he doesn't, then what's the point of the incarnation, what's the point in becoming one of us, if you start out with an unfair advantage, if you start out some sort of perfectionist cuckoo?

Revised line 2: Christian children all should be
Mild, obedient, disobedient and good as he.

I have no children, so maybe I don't understand, but, come on. If your kids did everything they were asked to do without complaining, whining, procrastinating or wincing, wouldn't you be just a bit worried? After you got over the pleasure at the shock? If Sunday Club emerged into church at the eucharist in regimented silence I would be deeply worried, even if I was just anxious about the size of bribe and / or threat that must have been offered them to effect such a transformation.

The focus of Christmas is the humanity of Jesus and human babies cry, human children (and adults) are not always obedient: it is part and parcel of their embodied humanness.

What the birth, life and death of Jesus shows us is that humans *can* do God's will: we can be more than the bawling mewling selfish disobedient lump of perdition: we can be a bawling mewling disobedient lump of perfection.

What the birth, life and death of Jesus shows us is that we can strip away the distortions of the human millennia, we can see past the thick patina of thousands of years of greed, oppression and aggression, and see that, warts, crying, disobedience and all, humanity is truly made in God's image.