

Christmas! Christmas, is... coming. I know it comes round, no surprises, same time, same day every year, 25th of December, but you know, it won't always be that way. One day Jesus will come again and among the many things that will mean is there will be no more Christmases. That explains why the people most fervently praying 'Maranatha! Lord come quickly!' during Advent are the clergy. Not, I hasten to add because we don't like Christmas- we love that way-beyond burnt out exhausted feeling-, no, no, but because we know there'll be something even better after the second coming and though it won't be quite as camp as Christmas it won't involve Santa, oranges with candles stuck in them or anyone singing Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer. Even Cliff Richard when he is swept up in the rapture will be with the volume turned completely down. The bliss to come!

Anyway, until the time when God calls time- could be any day any time now- but assuming we've still got *some* Decembers left before Apocalypse now, Christmas is doing what it always does this time of year and is drawing ever closer. You know this of course, as Christmas has been in the shops now for several months, but away from the world of commerce and closer to the pew where you're presently perching, the prep is well under way. Already by now the posters are printed, the crib service planned (I hope), choirs busy rehearsing, flower ladies avidly sourcing holly, and the church diary has three weeks of December block booked for school singing of *Away in a Manger* in varying degrees of harmoniousness from Bach to Boulez, but mainly the latter.

Past a certain age, admit it: looking forward to Christmas future is likely to prompt feelings of apprehension, anxiety and pre-emptive exhaustion; but Christmas is more than anticipation. It's also a look back, an invite to nostalgia, an annual opportunity to give in to the pull of the past and enter once more the fantasy land of days gone by and indulge those ever inventive grey cells as they make up golden memories of a rose tinted childhood. Like all things caught up in the event horizon of the nostalgic singularity, Christmas is one of those things like pop music, and fashion and children's TV, that by definition were always better when you were younger. Of course if we sat down and thought rationally for a moment, we'd realise that the truth is that nothing was actually better when we were younger, we just had lower standards, but then getting in the sentimental mood never does seem to involve rational thinking.

Next year, however, will be different. Not only will we be able to look back wistfully on the golden Christmas of 2018- ah, those were the days- but come March we'll be

putting the clocks back not one hour as we usually do but 45 years, so everybody will have the chance to live again those magical Christmases of the 1970s.

Coal gas, toast-toppers, power cuts, candlelight, nit nurses and nylon bedsheets. We had it all back then. If you're worried you're going to get travel sick on this memory lane trip because the next thing I'm about to start talking about is unwrapping christmas gifts of space-hoppers, hot-pants and chopper bikes, fear not. I can't really remember the particulars of any Christmas presents-they were there obviously, but I never had a space-hopper or a chopper or hot-pants. Much as I may have desired all three. No if I turn the dial back to Christmas past what I see is a *lot* of family parties. Admittedly my parents both came from fairly large families, but if interrogate my grey stuff, the entire Christmas holidays of my childhood seem to have been spent shuttling between the houses of aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, great aunts, second cousins, and when blood ties ran out, the family gatherings of old friends, church friends and possibly the people down the street; meeting up for afternoons and evenings of seasonal merriment and mirth. Despite there being so many bashes, all such parties were basically the same format. The first 30 minutes featured tortuously staccato conversations with obscure relatives, before moving on to those peculiar torments hung over from the pre-TV age, party games, then the whole shebang ending with 'tea.' Though served on various permutations of garish crockery, the menu for tea was invariable: 'Salad.' This reliably consisted of pickled beetroot, pickled onions, pickled red cabbage and if you were really unlucky pickled eggs. Tinned salmon, tinned ham or sometimes tongue which didn't need to be put in a tin before it became revolting. Cheesy wotsits, cheese footballs and some concoction made of hard tack ships biscuits and marmite optimistically called Twiglets, all topped off with a slice of polystyrene white bread plastered with Stork margarine. In fact the only thing on the table that hadn't been processed beyond recognition would be a few token limp lettuce leaves, and then they were only in an almost-natural state because nobody had worked out how to successfully can them, and believe me, it was possible to tin lettuce, it would have been done in the 1970s. Teas like that is why people always looked so thin back then.

So, family parties. There is a point to using up half the sermon time on this other than taking advantage of a captive audience to hold forth at length about the good old days, something I'm hopefully a good 20 years off doing by default. Here it is. Today is All Saints Day, and All Saints Day is nothing for Christians if it's not one big family party.

Usually we think that family is all in the genes; pooled, shared or adopted; but in this family *Jesus* is the DNA. Blood is thicker than water, and this is the thickest blood of all: the blood that binds us here is the blood of Christ.

So don't just stand there dithering on the doorstep, come in and meet the in-laws. All the family is at the party. The stern old matriarchs and the patriarchs are in the parlour. Wave politely then move on. Here's Mary the slightly obsessive young mum whose conversation rarely strays far from her favourite topic, her son. There's Elizabeth on the sofa with a couple of other Holy Matrons deep in conspiratorial whispers. The chap that's loitering in the garden where, thankfully, there's lots of fresh air is John the Baptist and he's nattering to Francis, the uncle who spent most of the 70s in a commune. Here's St Aelred who despite long ago having passed the 30 mark always turns up with his 'friend'. As you might expect any number of crushing bores are present, and the usual collection of older relatives with embarrassingly reactionary opinions, but if you're lucky you'll end up sat next to St Lawrence the family joker. Nobody wants the seat next to know-it-all Augustine: he knows he's always right and will argue the hind legs of a donkey and then sell them back to it to prove it. There's a gaggle of bored looking teenagers- St Cecilia hiding behind her headphones, Lucy with her extra thick NHS specs and Pancras lost in his trainspotting books. Needless to say there are always those who'll go to any length however extreme to avoid the party, such as St Simon Stylites the fifth century Syrian who built a pillar and then lived on top of it in order to get closer to God and further away from people. The anti-social element of the plan didn't work, it only made folk more determined to come and visit. No, we haven't now left the party, we're merely noticing that the ancient middle-East was just like 1970s Leeds: amusement was hard to come by and it was difficult to top the entertainment value of a man standing on a stick.

So. There we go. That's some of the clan. I'm sure you'll settle in just fine.

When talking about the church it used to be the done thing to talk of the church militant- us lot here on earth; the church triumphant- the saints whisked straight off to heaven- and the church penitent, the not-quite-there-yet souls languishing in the ecumenical gathering of purgatory. But that's just complicating matters and rather than dividing us into church militant, church triumphant, church penitent we just need one term: church family.

Now 'family' I know is a loaded term. It can speak of all that is best in the human experience as well as much of what is worst. It can be a blanket to comfort and a weight to smother; a crutch to lean on and a stick to beat us with. But when we talk about a church family, a family of faith, the communion of saints we are talking about the family as we know it transfigured. Something like what we see here and now but so much more. All the good stuff and none of the duff but exponentially extra. Like the old flesh and the resurrection body, it is recognisably the same, and yet transcendent, it's not what we are, but what we will become, it is family based not on blood but on spirit.

Like all the things that make us human, the family is in the very process of being transformed. As we sit here. Creation is not a one-off way back when; it is an ongoing project with an end point, a destination, for the most part, not yet reached. But as Christians we are uniquely blessed: we have hints of where we're headed and we have glimpses of God's plans and today as we celebrate All Saints we catch sight of the family of heaven at the feast of the kingdom, at the wedding banquet of the Lamb, the church family in eternal celebration. And the party started long ago, when the font water first splashed your head.