

There is always a certain relief when something finishes. Relatives coming to stay, the week in Carrotty Wood, the Rector's sermon- even if you've been eagerly anticipating it for ages, when the larger lady's finally warbling away there's always a part of you gently collapsing into the sofa muttering thank f... thankfully, that's over. It's no disrespect to anyone, but there's only so much excitement one can take. That's why these sermons are not usually more than 10 minutes a go- not because I don't have many ideas, but because your constitutions are too delicate to cope with the waves of ecstasy that would ensue from thirty minutes of solid preaching the word. Always your interests first, so selfless.

Coming home off the best holiday you've had in ages- a month in Tuscany, a fortnight in Taipei, two days in Skegness: yes it's depressing coming back to normality, but that part of you that is for ever Northern is comforted by the grey skies, the late trains and the special smiles-all-the-way friendly welcome-to-the-UK that the Border agency staff metes out to arrivals at Heathrow Terminal 3. All things must pass and though we often note their departures with regret, there is something sort of satisfying about endings. We may have the feeling of satisfactory completion, a job well done, something else ticked off the list. If not, well then there's another mess we can let go and walk away from and lose ourselves instead in the sense of forward movement, enjoy the little crackle in our synapses as we turn the first page of a new calendar. Even if the year ahead promises more of the same of what we've just left behind, though perhaps not the year just gone, please- even if it's all business as usual again there's still something there at the back of our minds doing a little dance of excitement as the year shuffles away into oblivion.

So, recognising all that can be good in saying goodbye and in the spirit of positively embracing ending can I then announce this morning that Christmas is over. That's official. If you're one of those handful of diehards who will insist that the Christmas season actually continues till Candlemas, well you're welcome in our church- you're stretching our commitment to inclusivity as far as it will go but you're still welcome- but if you want Christmas to continue another month, here's my response. No!

So, that's that done for another year then. Twelfth night was last night and- cue drumroll (we really need to invest in a drum kit)- Christmas is now officially over. Hurrah.

If you had a real Christmas tree, you'll be finding pine needles for a few weeks yet, but only when you venture into the living room barefoot; if you had an artificial tree

it will be several months before you stop finding fragments of tinsel in your breakfast cereal. But, despite the residue, Christmas is done. The council promises to start collecting your discarded trees tomorrow. So give it a couple of months and even that browning ghost of tinsel and lights languishing outside your house will have gone the way of all wood, down Beddington Lane and up in smoke.

The last of the turkey is eaten and if it isn't, don't eat it now and if you don't trust my advice on this one and do munch on some twelve day old poultry, please don't come anywhere near church for at least three days after the vomiting stops. The turkey has gone the way of all flesh, down Beddington Lane and. Well let's not go there.

Christmas is over. Move on now please ladies and gentlemen, no baubles to see here.

Christmas is over.

And now it begins.

No, I don't mean the countdown to next Christmas. Ladies and gentlemen only... not enough days till next Christmas

How can I put this? Let's talk about time.

There is a very strong tendency in human cultures to think of time as being in some ways as less a line and more of a circle. No need to go all mystical and Inca: with such notions as the circle of life, the wheel of fortune, even what goes around comes around, the notion is deeply imbedded even our thinking. And it's fair enough. That we notice the passing of time on earth is largely thanks to the turning of the earth under our feet marking out days, the circling of the moon marking the months, our elliptical revolving round the sun marking the years. And in church we circle round the seasons of our worship: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Trinity, Kingdom and round again : the cycle of saints days are wheels within wheels. And all captured in the bigger yet wheels of the years ABC lectionary cycle. And wheels are I think an excellent way to think of the relation of our church cycle to time, because rather than self-contained circles, the rhythm of our religion is more wheels on the road of time. And that road does not ceaselessly circle back on itself, it is a straight line, and there is only one direction of travel.

Let's look out the window of our stretch limo, look down at the road. That road is not tarmac. Though it's not composed of yellow bricks it is covered with snow. And

sort of glittery. The trees lining the road are decked with tinsel. And there's a donkey on the road, a little donkey, with a pregnant woman on its back, heading to Bethlehem. Take time to look out of the window and see what we band of pilgrims are travelling on and it soon becomes clear. We're motoring on the Christmas road! Yes, Christmas is for life. Not just for Christmas. I was wrong earlier. Christmas isn't over. Roy Wood was granted his wish before he sang it: every day is Christmas, because every day God is incarnate in the world.

Christmas was the start of it: a birth is always a start. And now the Epiphany season marks the start of the working out of the implications. They are many. If God is born into his creation it marks out that creation as infinitely important to God. It marks us out as infinitely important to God. It means that our lives matter— from the really big stuff where we might deliberately invite God to be part of the proceedings (the hatching, matching and dispatching), to the blandest of everyday Monday afternoons where heaven seems so far from our sight that it might as well not be there at all. It means that each and every one of us are Christ's brothers and sisters and all that has big implications for how we think of ourselves and how we treat each other. And centrally, what the incarnation means is that we can meet God, we can receive his grace, experience his holiness, in the things of this world. The water of baptism, the bread and wine of the eucharist, the events of confirmation, confession, marriage and ordination are not mere symbols: they are channels of God's grace. And the 'official' if you like sacraments are just the most obvious examples of this incarnational effect: unofficially, each grain of sand, every mote of dust, every blade of grass; each moment of life, the best of times and the worst of times, the days of sheer drudgery, the hours of stifling boredom, the sparks of joy and the rest of the hours we're too busy to notice much at all: all shimmer with the incandescent potential of holiness, radiant with brilliant Christmas light, the divine light; life for the living, lit by the incarnation. Not as catchy, I know, as 'I wish it could be Christmas every day', but pretty much saying the same thing.

The journey of the Magi did not end when they emerged from the stable, somewhat dazzled and lighter of gold, frankincense and myrrh. True, after today they disappear from the stories we tell, but their journey had not ended. We know this. Their journey is our journey. And once we have stepped out onto the Christmas road with them, begun our journey to Jesus, it only ends when we meet him face to face in the beauty of holiness.

The rest of the Christian year -Advent, Lent, Easter- makes no sense without Christmas. The rest of the Christian faith,- justification, forgiveness, atonement- none of it makes any sense without Christmas, without the incarnation. We don't have to sing Away in a Manger every Sunday, but none of it really makes much sense unless it is Christmas every day.