

October. Tenth month of twelve (or eighth if you've come over Old Roman). Here we are again down to the dog end of another year, almost burning our fingers we're that close to the filter. Except as October is Stoptober you should put that fag out now. October. Summer will officially end a day before the month does, but long before that, just as you start to think about turning the heating on, OFGEM decides it's going to let the gas companies up the energy price cap every hour, on the off chance that the French Government isn't making enough profit yet. Just when you'd forgotten what cold was actually like, nights and mornings drop into single figure degrees and during the days such is the unpredictability of the weather you are always over, under but never appropriately dressed. Harvest festivals linger in schools and churches from the previous month for at least a fortnight and from the first of the month Christmas has been bulging into any shop shelf-space not taken by plastic pumpkins, rubber viscera, zombie masks and Liz Truss costumes. The leaves were briefly a gorgeous golden red before they all schelpped over to rot in vast quantities in your gutters, drains and garden. Unlike April or September, almost nobody has seen fit to pen a song about this month. Are you thoroughly disheartened yet? Don't be. Because there's always someone worse off. And they're in the same room as you.

If December Dread is the besetting complaint of the clergy, then, for churchwardens- the real power in any parish- the month they would rather fast forward is the one we're sitting in right now. Yes, because October is parish return month. This is month the Bishop wants the churchwardens not just, as they do all year long, to count how many people come to each service but also to work out how many of them at each service are 'unique visitors' that is not counting the person who left their glasses in the pew in the morning and who came back to evensong to pick them up. And how old they were. And how many children they have. And if they were new, where did they come from and why did they come here and do they have a dog and were they wearing red socks. Now the post of churchwarden is one of the great prizes of the church: the duties are real but the rewards are many, the euphoria almost constant and the hassles few; the churchwardens lot is generally a happy one which is why they smile a lot (and yes it is a smile, they're not just baring their teeth) but the one month you might not get American style customer service from them is October, because October is like every maths test you ever sat all packed into 31 scintillating days. I suppose they could always just give in and make the figures up, but churchwardens are a high-minded kind, and that sort of deception would never occur to them. It's a good job they don't ask clergy to fill in the returns...

But really, the churchwardens of England shouldn't worry about what they send back to their bishop. If it wasn't for their chaplains who've been trained in such things, most bishops would be flummoxed with the geometrical puzzle which is 'which end of your hat is pointy and which end isn't'. This is not, I hasten to add, because the members of the episcopate are not intelligent. Far from it. Those in the purple are smart cookies to a woman and a man. And they can certainly read sermon notes. Very intelligent. Bishops are brainy, but they are Christians and Christians are not mathematicians. I'm sure some mathematicians are Christians, but in general those

who are Christians are a cross-section, more or less, of everybody in this country, and, despite generations of state schooling, most people in England are not mathematicians. With the exception of whoever is chancellor this week most of us can give the answer to the question: what is two plus two... either four or a double date, but when it comes to doing the math it's rapidly downhill from there.

Not convinced? Let's head for where we always head at this point of a Sunday evening: the Bible.

*"And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men"*

About? Couldn't you be more specific?

*"About five thousand... besides women and children"*

Of course it could be worse. Start having visions and:

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count,*

Could you not even try? Perhaps the big numbers are a problem? How about something smaller?

*Matthew: When he came to the other side... two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him.*

*Mark: They came to the other side of the sea... a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him.*

Well is it one, or is it two? You could use your fingers to count this time.

Maths is not a scriptural strong suit. Either it's maddeningly vague— about this, a lot of that— or suspiciously big and round:

*"that day 3000 people were added"*

*"All the days of Noah were nine hundred fifty years"*

There is a time in the Bible, of course, when the numbers are notoriously specific.

*Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.*

Aha. And? Oh, you're being symbolic.

Which is the third leg of the stool you really don't want to sit on: either maddeningly vague, suspiciously big and round or wholly symbolic.

Now, you might be thinking: yes, that is the Bible- one, two or more thousand years old. Surely somebody must have been listening in class since then? You! At the back. With the pointy hat! Pay attention.

Well somebody might have been paying attention, but when you see the conclusions that are sometimes reached when they've added up all the figures the churchwardens so dedicatedly collect, you do wonder. Conclusions like, if we draw a line here it proves there's a revival happening. Oh no, we've been holding it the wrong way up we're all doomed. The answer to the problem is more bishops.

Anyway, I'm lurching dangerously away from the point.

Which was that as Christians we are not mathematicians. Which is probably a good thing, because when it comes to what we, as Christians, believe, it doesn't quite add up. Not just the ages of the Old Testament patriarchs or the number of guests at the picnic. All of it. Whenever we make strict historical, mathematical or scientific claims, every last bit of evidence says, it doesn't add up.

So what do you do?

Well you could go into denial, an ever-popular choice among Christians.

It doesn't add up! Yes it does, it does, it does!

Fundamentalism, creationism, puritanism: various Christian ways of pretending you haven't failed the maths exam. That's the denial option.

Or we could get smart.

It doesn't add up! Of course it doesn't. That's because it's not maths.

Of course, running a parish church involves being able to do maths- counting people, paying bills, not paying bills and so on. But away from the everyday, Christianity makes some very big claims. Jesus of Nazareth was the God who created everything, was born and lived as a human. He was crucified, raised from the dead and ascended to heaven. Christianity makes some very big demands on its followers. Take up your cross every day and follow him.

Very big claims. Very big demands. In a world where we can send a camera to photograph Pluto (the planet), consign smallpox to oblivion, travel from London to China in half a day and communicate in sound and vision with a person in Taipei instantly, in a world where we are, notwithstanding Vladimir Putin and the clowns in

the cabinet, wealthier and wiser (as a species if not necessarily individuals), than at any time since Eve first stood upright on the African savanna; in this world, Christianity does not compute.

But it doesn't need to. It's not rocket science. It's faith. And all you need for that is an open heart.