

It's been a tough year... and a half... and counting.

So please forgive me if I open tonight's homily with someone else's jokes. At least they're jokes. I could be starting this sermon with, I don't know... religion, perish the thought. Joke it is. Someone else's jokes are almost always way better than mine; my best are usually about bishops, so you never understand them. If it was nuns... well you might understand but I've yet to hear a nun joke repeatable at Midnight Mass.

So this little nugget of humour with which I'm going to kick off the next nine minutes of your life you'll never get back was brought kicking and screaming into the world by Joan Rivers. Remember her? She was a sort of John the Baptist to Ruby Wax. You don't remember her either. Maybe I should have claimed it for my own after all. Anyway, here it is.

"I hate housework. You make the bed, wash the dishes, and then six months later you have to start all over again."

I can add- me not Joan Rivers- I can add that cooking is just as bad if not worse than housework: an hour in the kitchen, 15 minutes being eaten and from the humblest beans on toast to the poshest soufflé it all ends up sh... ooting its way to the Beddington Treatment Plant. At least with sermons you can recycle them every few years.

But back to housework. Before lockdown I thought I spent most of my working day at home. Only after I was forced by the pandemic to stay home all day did I realise this wasn't really true. Yes, on most days I will circle back to the Rectory at regular intervals, but then a lot of my time would be spent- at church (you don't say), on visits, at meetings and so on. I realised I didn't actually normally spend all my time at home, because one of the effects, for me at least of spending even more time confined in the Rectory was to become periodically hyperaware of things I never really noticed before, which surely I would have if I had but been confined to the same four walls. Lots of people, I know, discovered in lockdown quite how irritating their partners actually were. I'm not going to say however that being stuck indoors

with Wei made me suddenly notice his annoying habits, which as he's here tonight let me say are few, certainly in comparison to mine. And I knew all about them in minute detail before lockdown. So, not domestic disharmony; what I really really noticed in those long days of stay-at-home was dust. It was everywhere. Shameful. Positively slattern city chez Rector. When the little beams of sunlight came cheerfully singing through the window to brighten the lockdown gloom, rather than warm my heart they merely highlighted the poor housekeeping. The glass was half empty; and worse, covered in dust. I could see it everywhere. There was no escaping it. Even my dog was called Xin- Mr Sheen! It's what your maid uses to polish the furniture. No escape.

It would be great if I could hold to Quentin Crisp's housework dictum, which is, keep your nerve and after two years the dust doesn't get any worse. But it's not to be. Perhaps because my mother looks a little like Hyacinth Bouquet era Patricia Routledge (and she's coming to the morning service so I can say that now) I must in some bizarre subconscious way be fixed on keeping up appearances. Sort of Freud but with a mop rather than... all that other stuff. I must hasten to add, if you visit the rectory (not right now, it's Christmas- bah humbug can't you leave me alone!) it's not squeaky clinical clean smelling like a freshly bleached summer breeze. Seeing the dust hasn't led me to extreme cleaning, just obsessive noticing. The worst of all worlds.

The really religious -there's that word again- of you may be wondering when the Bible's going to come into this. Maybe the really hyper-pious will be scraping their memories for something about housework in the good book- try Proverbs perhaps? Maybe dusting is one of the thing Solomon says makes a good wife? I know. Don't go to the Bible looking for gender rôle enlightenment. Alas, trying to guess the scriptural reference is heading up a blind alley, and anyway, only the churchwardens know what's coming next in my sermons.

No here's what the point of all this talk of housework is. To make you feel guilty. No it isn't! It's to make the point that it's only when you're forced to stop, as we all have

been this past year, even those of us who have been working through it all; it's only when you're forced to stop... that you start to notice what you're always too busy to pick up on, only when you grind to a halt that you see what you've always been rushing past, but is always there.

That's why this night is so precious. You don't have to get up for work tomorrow. I do, you don't. Only the bare essential services are open now- churches, hospitals, (?) pubs. Normal service has stopped. All the usual stuff that's humming and thrumming in your head is locked out. Right this second you've unexpectedly got a break from worrying about feeding the hordes tomorrow, sorry for reminding you. Even if you're with your family, for about an hour and a half, you don't have to talk to them so you can't argue with them! We're in this strange place called church. And for once we can see what's always there, but we don't normally notice.

God is with us. Now, it really is Christmas every day; every day now till the end of days and times, Jesus has been born. Of course, February 12th and April 7th and September 10th don't feel like Christmas. Even December 23rd despite the decorations and the constant carolling, isn't quite the festival in full focus.

But there's no denying that today is Christmas. It's not Christmas eve. That ended for the church when it got dark. No. As Noddy Holder saith, it's Christmas. Sorry, I draw the line at Slade impersonations. It's Christmas. God is with us. Jesus is born. Everything else has stopped and we've finally noticed.

First time around, of course, hardly anybody noticed. A few shepherds. Three camel-riding astrologers. Herod when they told him.

They noticed. And then they quickly forgot.

Years and years later a handful of religious weirdos noticed. And then a few more. And some more. And more and more and more, down the centuries, scrolling through the years, faster and faster, time blurring past time until we reach

Beddington, December 2021. And here we are, with the shepherds and the wise men. With ox and ass. With Mary and Joseph. With the angel choirs. We've noticed. Christ is born. God is with us.

Tomorrow we'll still remember. And the day after that. Probably by the end of the week we'll still sort of think it's Christmas. But then we'll take down the tree, pack up the decorations, send home the relatives, spend the gift vouchers, recover from the turkey-and-alcohol induced digestive maladies, a new year will start rolling and we'll forget till next December.

But this year, don't.

Keep your heart circled with tinsel and fairy lights. Because what is so glaringly clear tonight should be blindingly obvious every hour of every day, because whether we remember or not, whether we notice or not, it is still the truth every second of every hour of every day.

God is with us. Christ is born.

So.

For the rest of your life here on earth, and may that be many a year yet; for every day; Happy Christmas.