

If I interrogate my memory, I have to admit that I cannot distinguish any one Christmas in my childhood from any other. Bathed in that amber glow of golden days nostalgia, they all seem to merge into one impressionistic montage of excited present opening, incipient nausea caused by the combination of sleeplessness and the smell of slow-cooking turkey, family parties consuming vast amounts of pickled beetroot and tinned salmon and (memory being an inveterate liar) most inventive of all, snow, which according to the meteorological records has only happened on Christmas day once in my life, when I was two. Come closer to the present day though and it is possible to tease some of the tangle apart and distinguish one yuletide from another. So much clearer on the memory horizon is the teenage Christmas where, for the first time in my life, I was the last person in the house to wake up rather than the first; the first Christmas after my father had died- not all memories are happy ones; and seared in the synapses, though it was twenty-two years ago, my nephew William's first Christmas.

I had travelled up to Leeds by train from London and, though it is geographically a journey of only 200 or so miles and chronologically a mere 2 and a half hours, for a recently un-naturalised north Londoner it is mentally an epic journey indeed, almost, but not quite, as challenging an odyssey as going south of the river. But home, wherever it is and however far one has travelled away from it, is always the place one wants to be at Christmas. Christmas like it always used to be. Except this particular year was different. From the very first day it became clear that William's first Christmas was to be 100 point bold all-caps **WILLIAM'S** first Christmas; that is, parents and grandparents had clearly conspired before my arrival to ensure that the topic of all conversation was, erm, William; all activity was naturally enough centred around William who took his pride of babyish place in the centre of the room; all eyes were constantly on William and of course in between talking about him we were treated to proud parental running commentary on his every move and facial expression. Just in case anyone ever forgot, William would periodically scream like his life depended on it, a coloratura vocal performance that would stop mysteriously some 30 minutes after it had started but only after every which way had been tried to quiet him down. Maybe he was bored too.

Don't get me wrong. There was no sense of jealousy here: centre of attention is the last place I ever want to be. If there are children around then they should be the centre of Christmas. But, the outer limits of my interest in things baby are quickly reached and it is impossible to force yourself to show a lively engagement when the topic of conversation reaches the comparative contents of said nephew's nappies.

So, time stretched on at the interminable pace it seems to take when you are bored out of your mind and / or travelling to Croydon, but eventually even the most talented and appealing of babies have to sleep so William was packed off to bed while a cup of tea was made. Hurrah! Finally! Time at last for an adult conversation, perhaps about adults?

'Let's watch a video' my sister cried. Ok, well in the absence of conversation, entertainment will do. With no discussion of what would be watched (I naturally assumed there must have been an earlier trip to Blockbusters) the tape was in the machine and we settled down to watch a video of...William. William crawling, William bawling, William bathing and mostly William, smart kid as he is, pulling the face that says 'why does that idiot keep holding a camera in front of me?' You can still see that one on the occasions he turns up at evensong.

Babies are important. The first Christmas of the firstborn. Very important. I know that. Please don't try to explain it to me after the eucharist, I understand. So how may you ask could it have been done slightly better? Easy. Give me the edited highlights! Cut out the cr... inessentials. Even the most exciting events are padded with stuffing, there's lots of sitting around waiting before the good stuff happens, you want to remember the foreign holiday and forget the airport, we all know that, so skip to the good bits. You want the ten minutes of argument in every Big Brother day not the twenty three point seven hours of nose picking, wind passing and sitting around gazing vacantly into space. When you sit down to watch David Attenborough you might think the world is crammed with creatures, teeming with wildlife but it ain't. Most of it is vast and empty, even the seas: the shoals of flying fish are the exception not the rule of the big wide ocean; at the North Pole you're more likely to see a soldier sucking a glacier mint than a polar bear.

So give me the edited highlights. If Eastenders were an actual 30 minutes in the life of East London it would be tedious beyond belief: give me the highlights. No wonder Classic FM is so much more popular than Radio 3, no wonder the greatest hits album sells more than any other. Religion is not exempt. The Bible is no less a product of 'best bits' thinking. Yes, our Holy Scriptures. God's best bits. It wouldn't be much of a read otherwise. The Bible is the oases in the desert of salvation. It has all the drama and none of the humdrum. Economy is the order of the day.

When Kenan had lived seventy years, he became the father of Mahalalel. Kenan lived after the birth of Mahalalel eight hundred and forty years, and had other sons and daughters.

That's it. 874 years in two lines. That's what you call heavy editing.

Not every meal ends up recorded or what was on the menu. There's very little washing of clothes in the good book and no ironing at all. Paradise. Only twice does someone go to the loo: Saul has his cloak cut while he's at his business and Eglon ends up with a sword stuck... where it shouldn't be. No wonder nobody wants to go to the smallest room in the house.

Our gospel today is beyond tight-lipped. Shepherds come. Shepherds go. Jesus is circumcised (ouch). And then, apart from the presentation and losing Jesus in the shopping centre, sorry, Temple, nothing. For 33 years. At least. The most important person who has ever lived and there it is. A gaping 33 year gap in the CV. And then 3 years of highly condensed 'best bits' and before you can say Zechariah's your Uncle, its Calvary. There's a little bit about the Resurrection, a sliver of the Ascension.

In one way this is how it has to be. Who would read the Bible if most of it were December 22 AD 19. Jesus woke at 7 am, had breakfast. Worked in the carpenter's workshop till tea break. After the tea break he continued planing the door... and on and on. We need the edited highlights, the best bits, if the Scriptures are to grab our attention, if we are to understand anything at all about God.

There is a danger here, though, and though it isn't obvious, it is real, and the danger is this. When we read all the excitement and drama of the Bible stories, we can think that that is the only place that God is to be found, that He works less in mysterious ways than in big ones: that God turns up for the big spectacles, the showstoppers, the melodramas, the cliffhanging dum dum dum dum dum du du dums. We expect to see drama from God if he is active in our lives and as a complement when drama happens in our lives, those rare occasions when our lives do become like a trip to Albert Square, we readily see God's hand there, blessing, hopefully, but perhaps also punishing. We might wonder what we have done to upset God when we lose our job; but just another day at the office fails to bring him to our attention. We may be conscious of God's blessings in our life on our wedding day, but rarely on a Monday afternoon 3 years, 5 months and 3 days afterwards.

But he is there just as much for the dull day at work, the times in the checkout queue, stuck in a traffic jam, waiting at the school gates, snoozing in a sermon, there as much as for those tiny islets of joy or pain that pepper the vast watery wastes of our lives.

He cannot be just a God of the best bits. Or the worst bits. It's easiest to see him there of course, it's writ in letters 100 feet high. GOD IS HERE! But there he is, all the other times too. He is a God of everything, everywhere, every time. The big bits get our attention. But please don't forget: they're only the start of the story...