

## *Fr Andrew Fenby*

There are some things in life that just seem to be made for each other, things that naturally pair up like the proverbial horse and carriage. How does the song go? Anyway.

Tomatoes and basil. Made for each other. A classic combination.

Fish and chips. The Italians know their food.

Gin and tonic. One a bit closer to your heart.

Lennon and McCartney. Gilbert and Sullivan. Laurel and Hardy. Basil and Sybil. Death and taxes. Thunder and lightning. Exchange and Mart.

Some things in life were just born to be together. Those are the no brainers, the stuff we don't need to think about; we never see the join, so smooth is the fit.

There are less likely pairings that just well, seem to work even though according to the rule book they shouldn't.

Round this time of the year Yorkshire people will be eating Christmas cake- nowt special about that you might say- even if northern confections have a bigger lard content than your cakes down here. However up there in sod's own county they will be eating that Yuletide cake... with cheese. That's not cheesecake. That's not cake followed by the cheese course. That's fruitcake and cheese together. In the same bite. Hat's off to folks of the moors and mills, they have at least discovered a way to make the unpalatable edible. Christmas cake and Wensleydale: it works. Who'd have thought it? Somehow the addition of coagulated milk protein makes all that heavy cakey stuff just slip down easy. Try it. You can do a comedy northern accent at the same time if you want to liven thing up. Always works for me. On a similar principle you could try sampling sponge cake with salad cream, which is not a Northern habit but something I tried once when I was a kid and mum wasn't looking. It worked. Honestly. Chocolate and Chilli. Denim and Denim. Sonny & Cher. Will and Kate. Unlikely pairings sometimes work.

And then there are pairs that don't unexpectedly gel, they're the twosomes that just really shouldn't never be put together. Dogs and cats. High winds and bin night. Squeaky beds and semi-detached houses, Cliff Richard and Christmas, Boris Johnson and power; oranges, candles and children (which isn't a pair but who's counting?).

Always there should be somebody standing between these pairs, keeping them at arms length away from each other. Do not combine. Keep well apart.

Regular attenders will not be surprised when I say that the place of 'don't let them see each other', is where we're going tonight, the land of mentos and diet coke, the land of sodium and water, the land of brussels sprout flavoured crisps, the land of don't whatever you do, put that with that.

But before we go there, I'd like to temporarily raise the tone a bit and invite us to dip our fingers in the rarefied world of fine arts. I wish I could do a Brian Sewell voice- I know that's what I sound like normally- but as soon as I climb into this pulpit I somehow start speaking like an extra from Emmerdale. Odd.

So, art. Very often the most interesting things in a picture is not the main attraction- the gibbering aristocrat showing off his horse or the girl with the big earrings and the enigmatic smile. Very often the most interesting bits are what is on the periphery, the things round the edges, those little details that are not centre stage but still snag in the mind. It's interesting, because a painting is not a photograph. Anything that's there is what the artist wanted to be there, nothing is extraneous, all is deliberate. The handkerchief in Whistler's mother's hands, the bored looking dog in *Las Meninas*, the church in *Starry night*, the bridge in the *Mona Lisa*. All in the background but essential to the picture. When you consider religious art, everything, but everything, top, bottom, centre, edges is trying to tell you something, screaming at you 'look at me, I'm important.' Take a look at the Mediaeval paintings in the National Gallery (that's the big building besieged by mime artists about 10 minutes walk from Primark): everything has meaning, nothing is there by accident. That woman with a circle round her head? Saint. Holding a little organ- keyboard instrument- Cecilia. Holding a lamb: Agnes. Holding a plate with a pair of eyes on it. Lucy. Half their head missing? Thomas Beckett. And then look at the surroundings and the saint is nestled among objects that speak of events in their lives, attributes of their character, episodes from their legend, icons of their miracles. Come and look at our stained glass windows in the day time. We're open every Sunday morning. Nothing in a religious scene is not trying to tell you something. About God.

So. Let's look at the most famous religious scene of them all, the one that for two thousand years and counting has been represented in art works great and small, masterwork and amateur, the Christmas Crib. Churches all over the world are proudly displaying a Nativity right now, there's at least three in St Mary's. You may well have a crib set in your own home, you know, those figures hidden behind the

inflatable Santa. Instantly recognisable, universally known. You can almost certainly rattle off all the elements of the Christmas Scene without thinking: Setting: Stable. Cast: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, Shepherds, Wise Men / Kings / Magi, angels, star. Props: manger, straw, crooks, Gold, Frankincense, Myrrh, inflatable Santa. Animal extras: sheep, camel, ox and ass.

In this scene, as in all others, nothing is incidental and the stuff on the side is possibly the most interesting of all. You might have heard the symbolism of the gold, frankincense and myrrh, but what about the ox and the ass. You ever thought about them? Why *those* two animals feature? Don't say it's because Mary rode there on a donkey and what else are you going to get in a stable but an ox. Because that would be accidental and nothing here is coincidental. The ox and the ass have a real and deep significance. Which I'm going to tell you about. One warning: whatever you do, don't go home and Google 'ox and ass'. You'll be shocked at what comes up. At least make sure the children are out of the room before you hit enter on the search. Don't look in your Bible either (as if you would!) because when you find the chapters with Christmas- the start of Matthew and Luke- the ox and ass are not there. They've come from elsewhere. But don't worry: lots of the rest of Christianity isn't in there either.

To know why the ox and ass are a Christmas fixture you have to look back a bit further to all those impossibly dry Old Testament books- principally everybody's favourite, Leviticus- where the religious laws of ancient Israel separate all creation into things you can eat, and things you can't; things you are permitted to wear and things you're not; things that are pure and things that are impure; things that are holy and things that are unholy; things in summary that the priests call 'clean' and things that they call 'unclean'. Cleanliness is next to godliness: things that are clean are good and holy and religiously right; things that are unclean, are not.

Which gets us to the crux of the crib scene. By ancient religious reckoning, the ox is clean. And (no snickering please) the ass is not.

But they're both in our picture. And they're not there by accident. Both clean and unclean— together— gathered round the new-born saviour in the manger.

When you notice something on the periphery, something you're eyes had always previously skipped over, it can change your whole view of what's before you. You see the scene in a completely different light. Like our Christmas crib now we've noticed

our clean and unclean furry friends. Who's in this picture? Well Joseph. He'll get a tick from the priests. Sheep, yep. Shepherds though are a bit dodgier-embarrassing country cousins who'll walk mud into the carpet. Probably unclean. The Magi. For all their gifts (well it's the thought that counts), they are foreigners. Gentiles. And therefore unclean. Centre stage is an unmarried mother who's just given birth. Hot water and fresh towels no use. For 7 days straight, non-negotiable: unclean. The whole scene, religiously at least, is filthy, completely beyond the pale. If this is the birth of the Son of God, we're going have to rapidly rethink our faith.

(If you were wondering, the camel is unclean as well, but I haven't majored on that because, despite the humps, there's not as much comedy potential in a camel as an ass.)

So there it is. The Christmas scene. The defining moment of human history. The saviour of the world is born. What the scene tells us is, that saviour draws all to himself clean and unclean, without judgement. Clean/unclean categories no longer pertain. All can come to the crib. There are no exclusions.

We'll grasp this much more clearly later on when Jesus spends his adult life in the company of lepers and sex workers, women and tax collectors, the poor and the sick, the downtrodden and the outcast. Then you can't miss it, it's in the middle of the screen. But it is also there right from the beginning writ clear if you know how to read the story.

There are so many extraordinary things about the Christmas scene, so many extraordinary things about what we celebrate tonight.

Right at the centre is the impossible pairing of God and man. Impossible, but reality. There he lies in the manger, as real as you or me; fully human, fully divine. The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the lion and the calf together. East and West, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, clean and unclean: ne'er the twain shall meet.

Except. They meet here tonight.