

Christmas traditions eh? It wouldn't really be Christmas without them. Those two weeks of December that is just one enormous school carol concert, microtonal mash-ups with an ever-shrinking repertory that will eventually end up as one verse of Away in a Manger and Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer on a loop. Forever. Really arcane arguments about what colour the vestments are on Advent 3- Rose, Gaudate or powder pouffe pink. Mine are always the latter. The disorientating temporal displacement of being at Mass in church at midnight and the weird aural displacement of the annual opera buffa soprano descant contest. Dissing Cliff Richard. Never tire of that one. Half-heartedly paying lip service to the notion that most of December is Advent, not Christmas. Pretending Christingle is a real tradition rather than something dreamt up in the 1960s by a bunch of hippies in crimpolene kaftans. Reminding the clergy that this is their busiest time of year- you don't say: you mean I'll have to work on a day that isn't Sunday? The sleep deprivation-induced Christmas morning Zombie state you never grow out of: up until about the age of 10 because of excessive present excitement; between 10 and 20 because at that age lethargy is an all-encompassing natural state; from twenty onwards the after-effects of drinking santa's sherry, and from seventy upwards the result of one too many festive bedtime Ovaltines. Pretending that warm red wine flavoured with cough syrup is nice to drink. Toothache that comes on at 5:30 pm on December 24th. Secret Santa. Stocking fillers. Strudel. Egg nog. Panatone. Lederhosen (how did they get in there?). Chestnuts sitting in a resealable packet. Cranberry sauce. Brussels Sprouts. Pigs in blankets. Add your own traditions in the space provided.

Traditions. It wouldn't really be Christmas without them.

The thing about traditions, of course, is they never stay the same. They change.

So for hundreds of years, the first day of the Christmas season was not sometime in the middle of September, it was today. However, that was then, this is now, we really- I mean seriously-don't want to go through all that again.

If coming to church this morning is part of a back to basics desire to have a real traditional Christmas, then the time for giving presents, historically, is New Year's Day not Christmas: sorry kids- you'll have to put them back in the box for another week.

Traditions keep changing. It's traditional.

Like some of the relatives you'll be seeing tomorrow, Christmas traditions get just that little bit weirder each year you see them. Sometimes they disappear completely. If you're lucky. Mostly they turn up regular as clockwork, but sometimes they bring a new friend along to the party. Although they're usually wearing the same jumper, sometimes they're sporting a new haircut, and just occasionally they've gone all gender fluid and Auntie Mabel is now Uncle Jim. And *some* of the traditional guests never seem to get the hint that though they turn up at the door every year without fail, and of course you're polite and welcome them in, you're actually gritting your teeth, being good-will-to-all-people tolerant and actually, you'd really rather they didn't bother.

Such as that British newspaper Christmas tradition of manufacturing a seasonal scandal about a shop that has closed Santa's Grotto on health and safety grounds or the council somewhere in the country that's banned Christmas because of 'political correctness gone mad'. It's traditional.

This year the 'end of civilisation as we know it' brigade haven't had to work terribly hard for their copy- they haven't even had to use their brains to make something up as they usually do. They've been given their scandal story gratis, courtesy of advertisements from Greggs and Tesco.

The former published and then hastily withdrew an advert for their hot pastry products which featured a typical three wise men at the crib scene, but with newborn babe in swaddling clothes replaced by a sausage roll. This was I have to admit pretty tasteless- rather like- I assume- the product itself. However replacement of the baby Jesus in a crib service by an inappropriate object is something that no longer has the power to shock me, not since the Riverside Animal Rescue Carol service during my first year at St Mary's when the holy infant had morphed into a baby hedgehog. Back to sausage rolls. Breaking with tradition, this year journalistic indignation was directed not at the Greggs advert itself but at the Christian Puritan rent-a-gob mob who really, really wanted to burn Mr Pie Maker for blasphemy, presumably before they banned Christmas outright for being unGodly Papist nonsense. Again. Some people have never understood why the 17th century had to end.

Our second pariah, Tesco, came in for a tirade from the tabloids not because of high fat snack food, not even because their Christmas advertising clip featured a same-sex couple stuffing a turkey (I would have made so much out of that if I was a journalist) but because the video advertising their festive fare

featured a family of Muslims. How dare they? Muslims! Mr Tesco dear, the clue's in the name. Muslims can't celebrate Christmas can they? They're not Christians.

The obvious answer to this objection is, if only card-carrying Christians were allowed to celebrate Christmas, Tesco wouldn't bother making an advert in the first place, there being so little money to be made from so few people. The vast majority of those who spent their seasonal shekels on Santa this year were not celebrating Christmas because of their religious beliefs. They were celebrating Christmas because, because they always have, because everybody else is doing it and, above all, because it feels good. I wouldn't care to guess how many of our 'Outraged of tabloid Wells' have actually been in church this Christmas, but I reckon the answer is 'not many'.

And I'm not sure it matters.

Yes, absolutely, 100% cert it would be great if loads more people came to understand what Christmas was really about, came to realise that the salvation of the world lies in that manger. It would be wonderful if everybody wearing a paper crown and gobbling down the turkey today became churchgoers and, preferably, signed-up members of the C of E. It would be great. Make my Christmas that would. I hope everybody does. But if they don't, it's still great that they're celebrating Christmas.

They're not crashing the Christian party. Because it's not *our* personal party: everybody's invited to this celebration and there's more than enough of everything to go round. The best gift ever was given by God that very first Christmas day, and there is more than enough of that gift for everyone.

We recognise what we've been given the best we can.

Some of us know the minute we start removing the wrapping that what's inside is just what we've always wanted. Some of us take a bit longer to come to that conclusion. But we all get there in the end.

Christmas. Just what all of us have always wanted. Happy Christmas.