

Winterval – What can we learn from it?



Whether or not there is a full-scale national campaign to de-Christianise our country's public life, it is fair to say that images of the nativity of Jesus seem to be in the minority of Christmas cards displayed in the shops. Shop windows refer to the "winter festival" rather than Christmas, and of course, we have all noticed the decline in observance of religion as gauged by attendance at Christmas Church services.

In 1982, there were over 500 people at the Midnight Mass at Holy Cross Church, with people in the galleries and seats everywhere. In 2009, just over 150 people attended the same service. Admittedly, licensing hours were quite different in 1982, with most pubs closing with sufficient time for revellers to get to the church for a Midnight start.

Rather than evidence of a campaign, my feeling is that the majority of people are no longer interested in the nativity of Jesus Christ being the centre of their celebration. They have moved out of the Christian faith to a greater or lesser extent and the national change to non-Christian words and images is merely a reflection of how most people feel nowadays.

In itself, this is probably not part of an insidious campaign, although the Church's detractors will be rubbing their hands with their own form of Christmas glee. The situation raises issues. Is the present situation more of a reality than previously? After all, we know that in the past, church attendance was socially prescribed and many people attended for the social advantages of being seen in church.

Now, the only people who attend church are those who really want to, the volunteers, those who feel deeply committed and involved, those willing to face the sneering of others when they find out about the commitment. That is, I would say, a healthier situation compared to the past.

In the 1970's a forward-thinking writer used a footballing metaphor to describe the situation of the Christian Church in England. In this country, he wrote, we used to be playing at home, where all teams feel an advantage. They know the ground, it is their home base, the crowds are on their side, and everyone wishes them well. On the other hand, playing away from home brings you to ground of another team, the crowd will be against you and hoping that you fail. The Christian Church has started to experience itself as now playing away in Britain, not playing at home. It is a shock, of course, but one that we can deal with given the right visionary leadership.

In the meantime, I have started to take comfort from the Winterval issue. In a way, this may offer the minority Christian community a chance to celebrate Christmas without the ballyhoo and consumer-crazy things that go on in the world around us. We have an opportunity to celebrate the real Christmas, quietly, responsibly, with care and thought for others our first response. If we were to detach ourselves from the nonsense that Christmas in the High Street has become, we would enjoy it much more, others would see our example and wonder what might be in it for them, and rather than losing out, the Christian Church would rediscover itself and from this might arise a fresh sense of mission to our country, our parish, and the world?

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