



## **Covid-19 means church will look different this Christmas**

Outdoors or online, Christmas at church in 2020 will be very different from previous years, including at St Mary's in Chapel Lane, Belfast. Picture by Mal McCann

**That Christmas is a high point in the Christian calendar requires no explanation - 'Jesus is the reason for the season,' as the saying goes, William Scholes writes in The Irish News.**

Yet like every other facet of life upended by Covid-19 during the past nine months, the traditional Christian celebrations that accompany Advent and find their focus on Christmas Day and the birth of Jesus look and feel very different this year.

Nativity scenes and Christmas trees may be present but congregations will be smaller, thanks to social distancing measures and caps on the numbers who can be safely accommodated in a church building.

They'll be quieter, too. Congregational singing has been generally discouraged since churches were allowed to reopen in the summer in the wake of the spring lockdown. Carols are a much-loved Christmas highlight for many, but where they do happen they'll be muffled by face coverings - bringing a new dimension to Silent Night, if nothing else.

Each church building is different, so there is no 'one size fits all' approach, but roped off pews, widely spaced chairs, one-way systems and stewards to oversee seating, movement and cleaning are among the features of worship in the second half of 2020, along with hand sanitising stations and perspex screens.

Many churches operate a ticket-type system, where one needs to apply online or by telephone to secure a place. This keeps numbers safe and facilitates contact tracing.

It means that should you turn up without a ticket, you likely won't be able to go into the church - a Covid-era twist on 'no room at the inn'.

Churches embraced online worship with alacrity when lockdown was introduced, adopting YouTube, Zoom, Facebook and webcams with the same sort of enthusiasm that earlier generations greeted the printing press and radio.

Many continued with their digital offerings when public worship resumed - and relied upon them during the recent 'circuit breaker' - and are encouraging people to participate in Christmas celebrations from their homes.

In the Catholic Church, for example, the obligation to attend Mass in person during Christmas has been suspended, an echo of what happened at Easter when churches were closed altogether.

**"We strongly encourage the faithful to keep Christ at the centre of Christmas this year," said the Catholic bishops in a Christmas message.**

"Clearly it will be impossible for our usual large congregations to assemble for Mass on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

"Christmas Masses will also be widely available over webcam and we strongly encourage families to 'tune in' from the 'domestic churches' of their living rooms and join with those who are gathering in their local churches in welcoming the birth of the Christ-child."

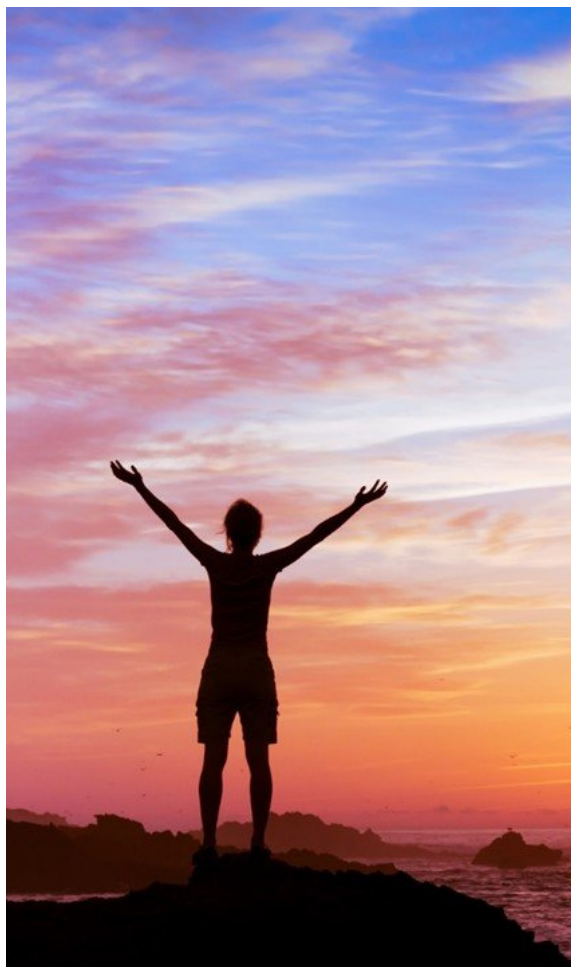
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The Church has developed resources to support online Advent and Christmas worship.

"The season of Christmas is a season of celebration, but this year it is essential that we celebrate safely," said Fr Eddie McGee, spokesman for the Diocese of Down and Connor. Its measures are typical of those being taken across Ireland.

"Normally at Christmas time large numbers of people wish to attend Mass.



**BE JOYFUL IN  
THE LORD, ALL  
YOU LANDS; SERVE  
THE LORD WITH  
GLADNESS AND  
COME BEFORE HIS  
PRESENCE WITH A  
SONG. ~ Psalm 100:1-2**

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 



"This year, however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our churches simply cannot accommodate such crowds if we are to ensure the health and safety of all and conform to Public Health Agency guidance and NI Executive legislation."

Down and Connor is holding some public Masses throughout the diocese "with restricted numbers following social distancing measures and places booked in advance".

"It is, however, likely that most parishioners and families will celebrate Christmas Mass at home, joining their local parish via online streaming services such as webcam," said Fr McGee.

This approach is being adopted across Ireland, with details of which parishes are celebrated public Mass and which are online available on diocesan websites.

### **Parishes have shown remarkable imagination in their Christmas events.**

One of the most inventive was on Friday evening when the Church of Ireland parishes of Trory and Killadeas in Fermanagh held a drive-in 'Carols by Runway Lights' concert.

St Michael's, Trory is situated at the end of the runway of St Angelo airport, which is also the site of a Covid testing centre.

A programme of music, interspersed with bible readings, was broadcast to up to 500 people parked on the runway in their cars.

**St Patrick's Cathedral Parish in Armagh will be another to add a drive-in dimension to its Christmas celebrations.**

**It is holding ticket-only drive-in Masses in the car park of CBS Primary School in the city on Christmas Eve.**

These will be something to "make this a Christmas to remember", said parish administrator Fr Peter McAnenly.

"It will be completely safe because people must remain in their cars," he said.

"We're encourage all families and young people in our parish to attend the drive-in Masses."

The Cathedral also hosted an online 'A Family Christmas' event on Sunday from 7.30pm.

It was led by Archbishop Eamon Martin, with Karl McGuckin, Eilis Fox and Malachi Cush.

A similar event earlier this year was watched by more than 80,000 people; another example of how Covid-19, in forcing change upon churches, is also opening up new ways of reaching larger congregations than ever.



## **Don't mingle and avoid the choir, Archbishop advises**

The Archbishop of Canterbury has warned people not to mingle after church services and to steer clear of choirs following the Government's announcement of new Christmas rules.

The Most Rev Justin Welby also said Christmas was not cancelled and that the public should take practical measures to avoid loneliness.

The head of the Church of England spoke hours after Boris Johnson announced new Tier 4 restrictions – which amount to a full lockdown – for London and the South East.

Even in Tier 4 areas, places of worship will remain open over the Christmas period, with people able to leave home to attend communal prayers, a wedding or a funeral – in

limited numbers – or to visit a burial ground or remembrance garden.

However, speaking on The Andrew Marr Show on BBC One, the Archbishop said elderly and vulnerable parishioners should not feel “under compulsion” to go to church over the festive period, and his own mother, who is in her 90s, would not be going because it was “too dangerous”.

To those attending church in person he added that people should not “mingle” after services and stay away from the choir, joking that he was often told to avoid the choir in church “because my voice is so bad”.

“Wave happily to people and go home,” he said.

Spending time on the telephone talking to friends and family, and planning future meetings were “practical” ways to cope for those feeling lonely over the festive period. “I have spent Christmases on my own ... and I have no illusions about how dark it feels,” he added.

“Talk to people on the phone. Ring, share and plan. Something about planning for the future helps us dream.

“What are you going to do? What are we going to do when this time is over?

“It may be many months yet but as the vaccine comes in things will change.

“What are we going to do to celebrate? And to mourn and to grieve, but crying and laughing to celebrate.” Following the





announcement of the Tier 4 restrictions, the Bishop of Oxford, Dr Steven Croft, wrote a letter sent to all clergy, which read: “As bishops we assure you of our continued and prayerful support for all that you are carrying.

“We also want to give clear and explicit permission to you not to hold in-person services if that seems best locally.

“You will need to give particular consideration to this if you are in an area where infections are rising rapidly, if you or your family are vulnerable, or if others who are essential to your worship such as wardens or organists are in vulnerable groups.”

Dr Croft said most parishes were able to stream or record worship via the internet. However, he added: “As you make these decisions, take them slowly and carefully and do your best to consult with others.

“There may be an understandable pressure to make decisions about Christmas services this evening so that announcements can be made.”

## **Christmas was born out of crisis and decree - Belfast Black Santa**

Dean Stephen Forde writing in yesterday's Belfast Telegraph -

“And it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar August...” With these familiar words, the Christmas story is retold every year in carol services and school nativity concerts.

But as we all know, this year is unlike any other, because our lives are changed from day to day by government decree and regulation.

On Saturday, the streets of Belfast were busy with shoppers. It almost seemed like the old normal. At the cathedral we even managed some socially distanced, out of doors carol singing. And through the day people gave generously to the Black Santa Appeal. But as the carollers folded up their music, news began to filter through of much tighter restrictions on Christmas from the other nations of the UK.

But Christmas was born out of crisis and decree: “And it came to pass in those days...” Mary and Joseph's lives were upended. “No room at the inn” saw hopes dashed and fear advance. But into the fear, and the spoiled plans, and

the ever changing regulations, a baby was born. Hope was rekindled. Christmas was born.

That's why I need to keep standing on the steps this Christmas of all Christmases. This Christmas too many people depend on Black Santa. Too many people depend on the generosity of others.

## **O Holy Night is voted favourite carol**

O Holy Night has been crowned Britain's favourite Christmas carol in a Songs of Praise vote.

Viewers of the BBC's religious programme were asked to choose their top 10 carols in a UK-wide online poll.

Overtaking other popular entries including Silent Night and Hark the Herald Angels Sing, O Holy Night came top. Carol experts say the song's pop-like qualities gave it the edge.

Choir conductor Karen Gibson MBE said on the programme: "It's not really just a Christmas carol, I feel that it's one which is a carol but also like a pop song. It does something, it's got that ballad feel, which makes people really want to sing along to it."

Andrew Carwood, director of music at St Paul's Cathedral, said the song made him cry and gave him goosebumps. O Holy Night was created in 1847 by French opera composer Adolphe Adam, who also wrote the ballet Giselle.

## 'Christmas Star' may be visible in sky

Stargazers could spot a bright light in the sky days before Christmas similar to that which is said to have led the Three Wise Men to the nativity scene, according to an astronomer.

Saturn and Jupiter will come the closest they have done in hundreds of years, creating what the researcher described as a “spectacular event in the sky” on Monday, which also happens to be the winter solstice.

While conjunctions, where objects appear very close to each other in the sky, are not rare, this will be an “exceptionally close” one, the closest since 1623, **Professor Michael Burton of Armagh Planetarium and Observatory said.**

The two biggest planets in the solar system will be just 0.1 degrees apart, one-fifth the diameter of the full Moon, and appear together as the brightest object in the sky, he explained.

He added: “When that happened it was in the daytime skies, so people would not have seen it, because it would have been too light.

“The last one which actually would have been well placed to be seen was 1226. So we're going back 800 years to the last one, which would have been up in the dark sky to be seen.”

The astronomer said a conjunction is one possibility for what has become known as the Christmas Star from the story of Jesus' birth.



December 22, 2020

The advice to keen stargazers is to look to the south west as soon as possible after sunset, with the best time between 4.30pm and 6pm.

And while a telescope or binoculars will help, the phenomenon will be visible to the naked eye — weather permitting.



## **Tralee Parish appeal as Covid puts paid to festive fair**

Photo - Linda Woods with Rev Canon Jim Stephens and Rev Phyllis Jones outside St John's last week as the parish launches a GoFundMe campaign in the absence of its vital annual Christmas Fair this year. Photo by Domnick Walsh



Tralee & Dingle C of I Parish is very grateful for response to gofundme appeal

It was to have been the highlight of the festive season for the parish, a time of togetherness and celebration of faith and community.

Sadly, the Christmas Fair mounted annually by the Church of Ireland parish of Tralee and Dingle has, like innumerable events everywhere, fallen victim to the pressures of the pandemic.

It leaves a large vacuum in the life of the close-knit community, as well as considerable financial pressure on the parish as the funds raised through the event go no little way towards maintaining the historic places of worship of the parish.

## **Hodge arrives at Southwark Cathedral**

Last month we wrote about the sad demise of veteran Southwark Cathedral cat Doorkins. We are happy to report that his successor has now moved in.

The tuxedo-clad stray is named after Dr Johnson's famous pet, Hodge - who sat on his lap while he compiled the first English Dictionary.

Hodge was introduced to the congregation on 6 December, the Feast of St Nicholas.

Hodge has already received his first Christmas card during the week from the two cats who look after the Cabinet Office



*Photo - Hodge had his first Christmas card from Evie and Ossie, the cats who look after the Cabinet Office. He met the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, rolling over for him so that the Mayor could give him a good tummy scratch, his favourite. And then he met the Archbishop of Canterbury. Not bad for a two year old!*

in Downing Street. For those who would like to follow him on Twitter his address is: @HodgeTheCat



Dreams and angels, prophecies,  
mystery and magi, choirs and shepherds,  
we make our way to the star-blessed stable,  
to the light shining miraculously  
in human misery and darkness.  
We are almost there.

## Pointers for prayer

John 1 : 14 - Jesus moved into the neighbourhood...

He moved into our messy lives

He moved into our complicated lives

He moved into our brokenness

He is not distant or aloof.

He is Emmanuel- God with us.

He is here. He moved in.

We pray for all for whom the celebration of Christmas is difficult; those who are ill, at home or in hospital, for the bereaved, the lost and the lonely. May they know the light of Christ in their lives at this time.

As we make our journey through Advent may we straighten out the pathways which lead us to the glory of the Lord. As we travel to worship our newborn King may we take each step with hope and joy.

Lord Jesus, when our Advent journey becomes hard please give us the strength we need to overcome obstacles and difficulties along the path; whether these are problems of time, relationships or other complications.

Loving Lord, however many years we have made the journey through Advent, may we continue to find the way exciting and refreshing. Help us to be open to new challenges and inspiration, alongside finding comfort in the familiar delights.

Lord our Messiah, as we journey once more through Advent, thank you that we are not alone – we walk together with our fellow pilgrims, enjoying your loving presence as we travel towards the wonder of the nativity.

As well as those now facing Christmas alone, please spare a thought and prayer today for the many, Health workers, police, clergy and others, who are working Christmas Day, for the benefit of others, and have planned their Christmas bubbles for some other day.

God of shadows and echoes, darkness and light, help us to be still in our dark moments, our waiting times, our uncertainties. And when morning comes, show us how to



greet the dawn without trying to make sense of the amazing light. — Anonymous



## Speaking to the soul

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord.” - Luke 1:13-15 NLT

This was the greatest day in Zechariah’s life. Being a male descendant of Aaron, he was a priest and that was a great privilege. However, there were a huge numbers of priests. It is suggested that there might have been up to 20,000 of them and so there were divided up into 24 groups which served in rotation. The greatest privilege of all was for a priest to be chosen to go into the temple to burn the incense at the time of the offering of the morning or evening sacrifice. Having burnt the incense, the priest would then emerge from the temple and pronounce a blessing on the people. This was such a great privilege that a priest could only do this once in his lifetime and many never had the opportunity.



The priest was chosen for this awesome responsibility by lot. Just imagine the sense of anticipation as the choice was made, and the overwhelming sense of privilege and responsibility when you knew it was you. And that's exactly what happened to Zechariah. The other major factor in his life was that he and his elderly wife, Elizabeth, had no children and, at the time, this was seen as a matter of great shame. It was a burden that they had lived with for many years. So when the angel met Zechariah in the temple and informed him that Elizabeth would not only have a baby but that their son would have a key role in God's purposes for the world, it is hardly surprising that he was left speechless.

This wonderful story reminds us that we should never put a limit on what God can do. The idea of Elizabeth having a baby seemed ridiculous – but not to God. We always need to leave our minds open to the new things that God might want to do in our lives.

## QUESTION

What surprising things has God done in your life?

## PRAYER

Lord God, help me always to be open to whatever you want to do, however surprising. Amen.



