

December 25, 2021

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**A Christmas Day miscellany
of news and articles**

Overview

+ A Christmas Day miscellany of news and articles

+People and places

A joint Christmas Message from the Archbishops of Armagh
Duke of Edinburgh memorial service at the Abbey
Over €1,000 for charities Raised at Douglas outdoor carol service
Catholics must learn to share the World - Bishop
UK Govt must act following UNSC vote to enable aid to flow into Afghanistan

+Perspective

We can find comfort in the rituals of Christmas by
Vincent Nichols

+Poem for today

The Oxen by Thomas Hardy

People and places

A joint Christmas Message from the Archbishops of Armagh



**The Most Revd
John McDowell and
The Most Revd
Eamon Martin say
in their message -**

Just before
Christmas 1937,
Monsignor Ronald
Knox wrote a letter to
the English Catholic
periodical, The
Tablet. Knox was the
son of a Church of
England bishop and
had converted to

Catholicism shortly after taking a brilliant First at the
University of Oxford. He later became the first Catholic
Chaplain to Oxford since the Reformation.

The letter arose from a remark that a friend of Knox's had
made, that she "wasn't going to have her house turned
upside down just because it was Christmas". Thinking
afterwards about what she had said, Knox wrote in his letter,

December 25, 2021

“What is Christmas from start to finish but things being turned upside down?”

Even the days, continually darkening in the run-up Christmas, turn with the solstice and light begins to win again. Just when trees should be at their barest, lustrous evergreen branches are brought indoors and enhanced with lights and glitter. And just at a time (especially in the ancient world) when darkness was a cover for thieves in the night coming to burgle homes, in our modern recasting of the story, a genial old boy squeezes himself down the chimney and leaves gifts.

Everything started to turn upside down from that first Christmas. Those who were least got the best places – the ox and the ass beside the manger and Kings asking directions from shepherds. Perhaps, the greatest revolution of all: the Virgin conceives and gives birth to a child. The wonder of all this ‘topsy-turvydom’ is summed up in the words of the beautiful ancient hymn, sometimes sung at Midnight on Christmas Eve, ‘O magnum mysterium!’

O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the newborn Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
the Lord, Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!

There is to a degree a natural instinct in us to try to turn the world back on its feet again, because God’s coming into his



own creation knocks us badly off balance. So we tie ourselves ever more tightly into the world of “getting and spending” and have communion in consumption. But we can’t shake off the feeling that there is a fragility about our indulgence; that somewhere there is a frail seam that will give way; a nagging feeling that there will come a day when there won’t be more tomorrow.

At this time of the year, perhaps, it is the very lavishness of Christmas that gives us a heightened consciousness of (and a bad conscience about) the “little ones” mentioned so often in the Gospels: the homeless, the poor, the rejected, and all those who long to see the world turned upside down again, when “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters fill the sea”.

At present there are many people who have had not just the two worst Christmases ever, but two of the worst years ever - those whose bodies have been overwhelmed or whose

December 25, 2021

minds have been scrambled by Covid-19; those who've had bereavements during the pandemic, whose plans have been cancelled, families separated, visits curtailed, operations postponed, businesses and livelihoods upturned.

If the Spirit is saying anything to the Churches this Christmas, might it not be to think about how we, as individuals but also as a society, can enter prayerfully and hopefully into that great mystery of the "Word made flesh", and hold on to more of the upside down world embodied in the Gospel narratives? Happy Christmas and may God bless you and your families.

+John - Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All Ireland

+Eamon -Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh & Primate of All Ireland

Duke of Edinburgh memorial service at the Abbey

Buckingham Palace has announced that a Service of Thanksgiving for the life of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh will take place in the spring of 2022 at Westminster Abbey.

The Duke of Edinburgh, who died in April this year, had a long association with Westminster Abbey. On 20th November 1947, he married HRH Princess Elizabeth here (she became Queen in 1952), and they celebrated

December 25, 2021

anniversaries including their Silver, Golden and Diamond Wedding anniversaries with services in the Abbey.

In 1956 he set up the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, the 60th anniversary of which was celebrated at a special service in November 2016. He was also President and Chairman of the Westminster Abbey Trust, set up in 1973, to raise funds for the restoration of the exterior of the Abbey.

For many years, His Royal Highness attended the annual Opening of the Field of Remembrance. Organised each year by The Poppy Factory, the Field of Remembrance sees thousands of poppies on wooden crosses and memorials, each representing a serviceman or servicewoman who has died in conflict, planted in the grounds of the Abbey.

He also attended a great many other services and events at the Abbey over the years.

Further details will be announced in due course.

Over €1,000 for charities Raised at Douglas outdoor carol service

The Rector of Douglas Union with Frankfield, the Ven. Adrian Wilkinson, writes:

Not to be deterred by the very necessary health restrictions which forbid congregational singing in church buildings, the parishioners of Douglas Union with Frankfield moved outside for their Carol Service this year.



Working in conjunction with the staff of St Luke's National School, the service was held in the playground between the school and the parish hall on Sunday, 19th December at 4pm. About 250 people, some bringing deck chairs and rugs for their knees, gathered to sing familiar carols while wearing masks in a safe and socially distanced setting.

On arrival they were greeted by Christmas carols played by the St Nicholas Brass Band, who based themselves in the school general purpose hall where the doors were wide open into the playground. The parish choir, under their director Veronica Tadman, led the congregational singing. The choir also performed the Swedish carol 'Jul, Jul stralande jul,' which was sung in memory of a much loved former choir member Barbro McCutcheon, who was originally from Sweden and died earlier this year. The 6th

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class pupils from St Luke's School, under their teacher Elaine Guinane, were also involved and they performed the 'Carol of the Bells' on handbells and sang 'Ring Bells of Bethlehem'. St Nicholas Brass Band played one carol, Silent Night and at the end of the service entertained those who stayed for some seasonal Christmas music as dusk descended. A retiring collection of over €1,000 was taken for a number of charities.

The Archdeacon Wilkinson commented afterwards:

It was wonderful to see so many parishioners and others gathered together for a service in one place. We are used to packed churches and large indoor services at Christmas in this parish, but Covid has put a temporary halt to all that.

December 25, 2021

This outdoor service allowed people from our four different churches, as well as our ecumenical friends, to meet up and sing and pray together. It was also good to see three generations of some families sit together. While we hope to be indoors for parish and school carol services next year, the service this year is one to remember.

Catholics must learn to share the World - Bishop

The bishop of Elphin says Catholics need to ‘walk alongside people of other religious traditions’

Bishop of Elphin has spoken about the need to be able to share the earth with people of different religions.

In his Christmas message, Bishop Doran said: “Like Joseph and Mary, and indeed like every newly married couple, we are being invited to step into the future together, in a spirit of trust.

“Joseph and Mary were Jewish by birth and by faith, but they lived in a world dominated by Romans.

“The Middle East then, as now, was a mixture of many cultures.

“Catholics in Ireland today need to work out how we can walk alongside people of other religious traditions and people of no faith, sharing the earth which God has given us as our common home.



“All of this will involve moving beyond our “comfort zone”. We may have to adjust our pace to be able to walk together.

“Patience and gentleness will be called for, especially when we find ourselves on “rough terrain”.

“As the Bible tells us there will be, “a time to be silent and a time to speak”. Who knows where the journey will lead us?

“It is 145 km from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That’s almost exactly the same length as our Diocese, from Bunduff to Athlone.

“It would take a week to walk that far, and probably more if you were in the final stages of pregnancy. St. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary left Nazareth to travel together to

December 25, 2021

Bethlehem, to be included in the census ordered by the Emperor, Caesar Augustus.

“The next thing we hear is that the couple have arrived on the outskirts of Bethlehem, and the time has come for Mary to give birth. St Luke tells us nothing about the journey. That is left to our imagination.”

“I found myself imagining what it must have been like for the two of them, walking together all that distance.

“They were newly married; starting out on a new life together. Soon they would have a baby to care for.

“What did they talk about on that long journey? What hopes did they share? What anxieties did they carry with them?

“You may have heard some talk recently about how the Catholic Church in Ireland is starting out on a Synodal Process.

“The word Synod literally means to “walk together”.

“Over the next four or five years, Catholics in Ireland are being invited to set out on a journey together, sharing our hopes, our disappointments and our anxieties and listening attentively to one another.

“We had actually begun a series of synodal gatherings in the Diocese as far back as early 2020 but, like many things, these were interrupted by COVID-19.

December 25, 2021

“Our Diocesan Pastoral Council is now exploring how best we can include as many people as possible in the preliminary conversations that will take place in the Diocese in the coming months.

“As we set out along our synodal pathway, there may be some unexpected turns, as there were for Joseph and Mary.

“But if Jesus is with us, as He was with them, and if we are walking together, isn't that what this is all about?

“As Christmas approaches and 2021 draws to a close,

“I want to offer my condolences to all who have lost family members or friends in the past year, and to those who have suffered other kinds of loss.

I take this opportunity to say a word of thanks to our priests, our deacons and to the sisters working in the Diocese and to all the many parish volunteers who have given so generously of their time.

“I wish you and your families every blessing for Christmas and the coming year. God bless you all,” he said.

UK Govt must act following UNSC vote to enable aid to flow into Afghanistan

International development charity, Christian Aid, has called on the UK Government to issue guidance for UK agencies and banks "without delay" to ensure aid flows into Afghanistan following a vote of the United Nations

December 25, 2021

Security Council (UNSC) to revise the sanctions regime to allow humanitarian aid into Afghanistan.

The intervention comes after new polling by Savanta, commissioned by Christian Aid, revealed over half, 53%, of voters believe that the UK Government has an obligation to enable aid to get into Afghanistan for humanitarian work.

The vote [22 December 2021] on the UN Security Council Resolution 1988 to introduce a humanitarian exception to sanctions on the Taliban means that humanitarian agencies and financial institutions that support them can now move humanitarian funding to Afghanistan via the banking system without fear of prosecution.

The decision follows intense lobbying. Just last month, a coalition of 17 international aid organisations urged world leaders to “identify safe, efficient payment channels” so that funding can be quickly accessed to sustain humanitarian operations.

Fionna Smyth, Head of Global Advocacy and Policy at Christian Aid, said:

“Afghanistan is in crisis with millions on the verge of starvation. Reports that families are so desperate they have been forced to marry off daughters to provide food for their children are heartbreaking.

"It is therefore welcome news that the UN Security Council has listened to appeals from Christian Aid and others to revise the sanctions regime to allow humanitarian aid into Afghanistan. A light of hope has now been lit.

"To tackle the hunger crisis and get aid to those in need, the UK Government must now issue clear guidance for UK aid agencies and banks without delay. We have a moral duty to ensure humanitarian operations are supporting the most vulnerable before it is too late."

Webinars, music, resources, broadcasts and books

Book - “Evensong” by Richard Morris - A song of praise to England’s vanishing Church

Evensong by Richard Morris. 336pp, W&N, £25; ebook £12.99 ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Review by Ivan Hewett

Evensong is an apt title for this beautifully written and moving meditation on the history and current state of the Church of England, partly because it names the service which, more than any other, incarnates the patient, meditative, undogmatic nature of the faith. As Richard Morris puts it, “Anglican evensong has been described as a home for the hesitant, a service for those who put store by doubt as well as belief.”

image

And, as he points out, it uses such evocative language. The evening Collects are what stick in my mind from singing in a



church choir half a century ago. “Lighten our darkness we beseech thee O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night.” I never really understood what the perils were but I was very glad to be protected from them.

Then there are those lovely lines that Morris likes so much he actually quotes them twice: “Minister: keep me as the apple of an eye. Us: Hide me under the shadow of thy wings.”

But there’s another more melancholy reason for the aptness of the title. The Church of England is approaching its own evening. Morris tells us that fewer than two per cent of the population attend church services, and many churches are

December 25, 2021

entirely redundant, “outwardly, part of the scene but functionally, meaningless husks”.

This is a cause of both sorrow and exasperation for the author, whose own life has been entwined with the Church since boyhood. He has a deep feeling for the continuities embodied in the rituals, language and even the stones of the church.

These were imbued in him from an early age, thanks to a childhood spent in various parsonages, where his father, an energetic and strong-willed parish priest – whose obituary appeared in this newspaper – was the incumbent (and if you’re not sure what an “incumbent” is, or why the author grew up in parsonages rather than vicarages, the glossary of Anglican terms at the beginning will put you right).

Morris tells us that fewer than two per cent of the population attend church services

Later in life, he approached the history and deep communal roots of the Church from the completely different point of view of a university archaeologist with a specialism in church history. He was charged with – among many other things – overseeing vital works while the tower of York Minster was being strengthened, and chairing a Lottery-funded heritage centre (which eventually folded) devoted to the Venerable Bede.

All this would have been material enough for a rich book, but Morris considerably complicates his task by introducing a third strand: a search into what drew his father and other idealistic and mostly Left-leaning young men to become

December 25, 2021

ordained after they came home from active service in the Second World War. We learn how these people, men who were literally battle-hardened, including Robert Runcie, a future archbishop of Canterbury, and Simon Phipps, a recipient of the Military Cross, led a movement to reinvigorate the Anglican church in the 1950s and 1960s. Phipps's father was another scion of the "born-to-rule" upper-class families who were so prominent in that generation of priests, and who pop up quite often in this book. We discover how Anglicanism intersected with the rising pacifist movement – Morris's father actually travelled to Moscow to take part in a World Peace Council.

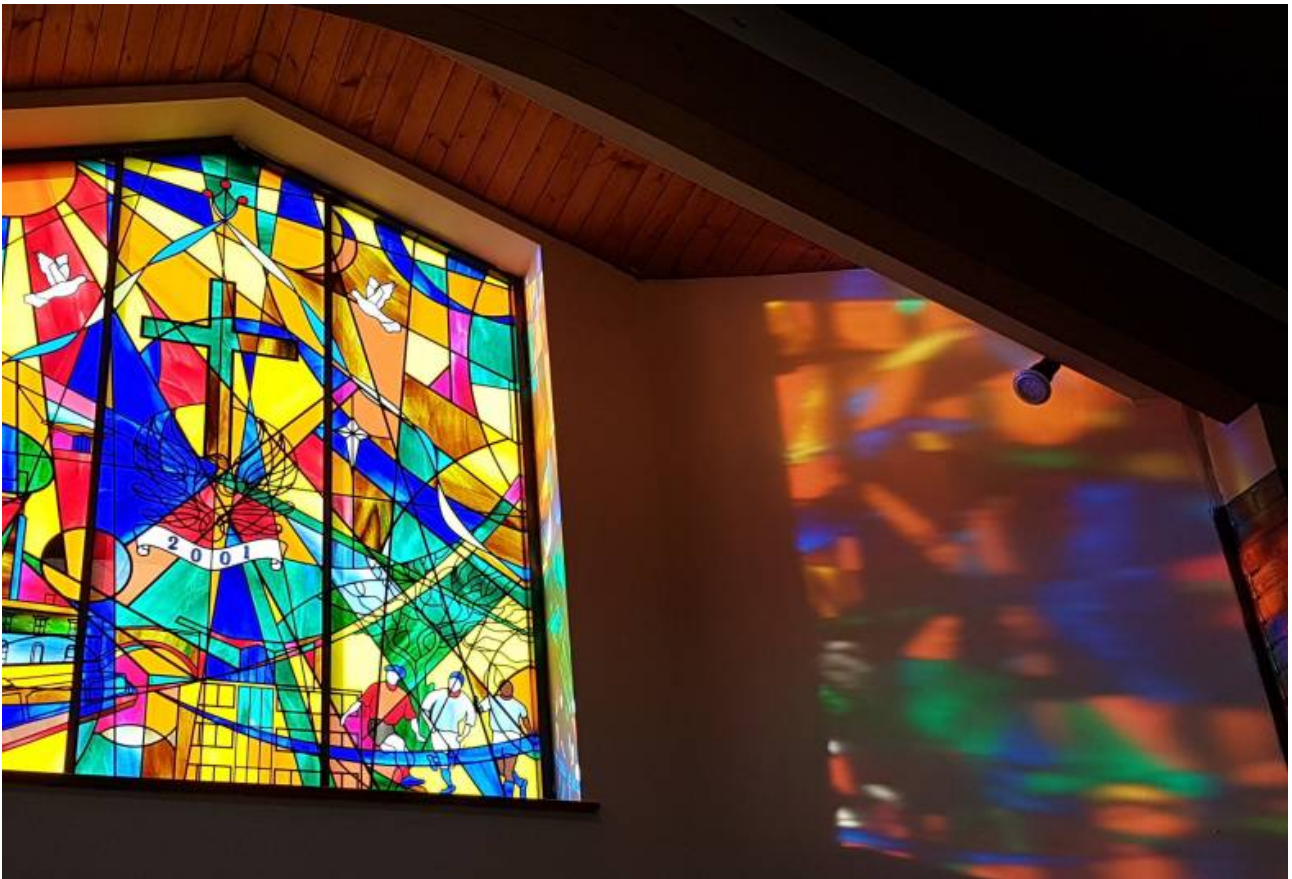
Choral evensong in Worcester Cathedral - a service that embodies Christianity's patient, meditative and undogmatic nature

Choral evensong in Worcester Cathedral: a service that embodies Christianity's patient, meditative and undogmatic nature

Morris is a man of extraordinary learning, who can't help digressing from the story of, say, the re-organisation of a parish structure in the 1950s to tell us about a little-known Celtic saint born nearby (Morris shares his father's

Morris shares his father's romantic attachment to the Celtic roots of Anglicanism), or how recent archaeology has proved that a "dark cloud" mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon history was actually caused by two volcanic eruptions.

The result is something extraordinarily rich, which interweaves past and present and illuminates many aspects of post-war Britain, including shifting class relations, housing and industrial policy, and the cultural tensions between



conservationists and gung-ho modernisers – the latter especially important for the Church, which was torn between the two. Instead of finding a principled way forward, it often resorted to intellectually dubious fudges, which arouse Morris’s anger – at one point he describes the Church of England as “pre-eminent in faith and fraud”.

policy, and the cultural tensions between conservationists and gung-ho modernisers – the latter especially important for the Church, which was torn between the two. Instead of finding a principled way forward, it often resorted to intellectually dubious fudges, which arouse Morris’s anger – at one point he describes the Church of England as “pre-eminent in faith and fraud”.

But, though the recent reforms of the Church rarely win his admiration, he loves the wisdom of the institution over time, revealed in such symbolic details as burying the dead near

December 25, 2021

or under the porch of churches, so that the living and the dead were joined together in worship. They bear out his deep conviction that cherishing traditions, and in particular medieval churches (of which there's a greater abundance in Britain than in the rest of Europe put together), is "not devotion to ashes but the transfer of fire". One feels the heat of that fire in this wonderful book.

To order a copy for £19.99, visit Telegraph Books online or call 0844 871 1514

Perspective

We can find comfort in the rituals of Christmas by Vincent Nichols

The joy of God coming to Earth is one that no pandemic can ever possibly dislodge

In just a few months' time, Her Majesty the Queen will celebrate 70 years on the throne: a remarkable jubilee of so many decades of service. Her steadfast duty has been such a consistent, reassuring example in all of our lives.

This is in stark contrast with the prevailing mood of the world at this moment. That mood can be summed up, I think, in one word: vulnerability. Making plans seems unwise; trying to predict what might lie next in store for us with this virus is something of a fool's errand.

This vulnerability make us anxious. Clearly, the pandemic, and our responses to it, have affected much more than

December 25, 2021

physical health alone. Vulnerability can corrode our confidence, turn us in on ourselves, makes us both passive and aggressive. It can take many forms.

Yet it need not be so.

A vivid memory comes to mind. Some time ago now I visited a family of refugees in Erbil, Iraq. They had fled their home in a matter of hours, taking only what they could carry. Now their home was no castle, nor a palace. It was a shipping container. Outwardly, their circumstances were insecure, desperate even.

Yet despite that, there was a serenity about them, a generosity, a desire to have an impact for good, even in their humble dwelling. They were determined that uncertainty about the future need not define them. Vulnerability, then, had not overwhelmed them. Indeed it opened them, heart and soul, to the hardships of others, that can sometimes be more hidden.

For that family, as for the Queen, an unwavering commitment to their Christian faith was an enormous strength. I could see this in the honoured place that the crucifix and images of the saints had in their container home. It was so clear that, for them, the pathways of vulnerability led them more closely along the pathway of faith. Their faith was a wellspring from which their serenity and their generosity flowed. I left that humble dwelling deeply moved and, in fact, inspired.

At this time, when we are all feeling vulnerable, look again at the circumstances of the first Christmas.

December 25, 2021

The story is well known: the requirement of the governing power for its citizens to comply with its edicts – in that case of registration in the town of birth – the difficult journey, the impossibility of finding accommodation, the harsh temperatures of the winter.

We don't always like to think of that. Sometimes, in our mind's eye, the animals are cuddly rather than smelly; the bedding in the manger is soft hay, not scratchy straw. Sometimes we gloss over the harsher aspects of the Christmas story. Yet in this year, more than ever, they can offer us consolation.



December 25, 2021

Here we see that God has chosen the birthplace of the “great little one” to be the vulnerability of the manger. He enters in weakness. The angels’ triumphant song, “Glory to God in the highest”, was sung in full knowledge of the circumstances which gave rise to it. That glory is not dimmed because of the darkness and poverty of the stable. No. That glory was there, and is there, for us to discern. Here we too learn that our own uncertainties, anxieties and miseries are themselves not barriers that shut out the light and love of God from our lives. Rather, as we assert so often in our Christmas proclamations, this is a light that shines into our darkness.

In the birth of Jesus, we see the brightness of eternity touching our world and our humanity in all its dispositions and situations: sinful and faithful, secure and fragile. That is more than reason enough for the angels’ song to resonate ever more freshly and powerfully with us this year.

What drowns out this song is the noise of our own self-sufficiency which we are so quick to defend, banishing the needy from our sight. Perhaps the pandemic has dented such self-assurance.

It is so right that we let the rituals of Christmas both comfort and prompt us, joining in the well-loved carols, decorating our homes, remembering again the company of family and friends who have gone before us yet seem still to stand beside us. In the situation of the world this year, if Christmas can teach us anything it may be this: that all the insecurities and vulnerabilities of the world do not obstruct or limit the love that the Christ-child has for us. His will to save us is total; his promise of eternal life is real. He reaches out in

December 25, 2021

love to our world, to us, just as we are, with all our successes and failures, our assertiveness and our contradictions. His is the life that triumphs over every death and every betrayal.

Christmas proclaims that Heaven has come to dwell on Earth, God in our flesh, a reality so utterly secure, giving a joy that no vulnerability, no pandemic, can ultimately dislodge. We celebrate Christmas, and set our course towards a new year, with joy in our hearts, a joy that is sure and eternal.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols is the Archbishop of Westminster

Poem for today

The Oxen by Thomas Hardy

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
“Now they are all on their knees,”
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen,
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
“Come; see the oxen kneel,

December 25, 2021

“In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

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