



JUSTIN WELBY SAYS THAT AMID ALL THE CERTAINTIES OF CHRISTMAS THERE IS STILL THE POSSIBILITY OF THE SURPRISE EXPERIENCED BY SCROOGE.

Does Scrooge prosper?

Like civil engineering, Christmas can be defined (for a clergy type like me) as the triumph of hope over experience. Genuinely, even at a cathedral, we rather enjoy it all. The place is packed, the atmosphere electric, the message and the story wonderful. The high carries us well into the end of January.

There are certain inevitabilities. Someone always says "It must be your busy time of year," as though for the rest of the year vicars are six days invisible and one day incomprehensible. The duplicating machine always breaks down around 20 December; the boilers break down on Christmas Eve; a choirboy is sick after getting at the sherry and mince pies; one or other of my relatives still adjusting to my being a vicar expresses surprise that I am at church so much (I've only been doing this 15 years).

There are other certainties too: articles in the press about why the writer a) hates or b) loves Christmas (normally the former); letters from clergy in the press about the true meaning of Christmas being something akin to Cromwell's notion (basically, if you are enjoying yourself stop it this moment); and answers from leading atheists pointing out that Christians themselves nicked the festival from the winter solstice; and a sadly true note from *Relate* about family breakdown over Christmas (it is the agency's busiest time of year).

And, of course, the corporate finance folk will be full of ideas that necessitate the Christmas break being shortened at almost no notice.

So does Scrooge still prosper, hoarding his millions, humbugging the whole idea and resenting the time wasted in holiday? The great thing about the Scrooge story is his surprise. For those who don't know the story, it is worth getting the book, *A Christmas Carol*. Essentially, a miser (Scrooge) is surprised by the visit of four ghosts (including his former business partner) on Christmas Eve who warn him about his future if he remains so mean. He changes and the story ends happily. So far so trite, apart from the genius of Dickens' writing.

The point is the surprise. As I said already, much of Christmas is about certainties, either ironic or moving. But part of its uniqueness, for people who are practising Christians or not, is that it is a time of year that breeds surprises. I don't go much for surprises. One of the key rules of good investor or banking relationships is never spring surprises – even good ones, in my experience. Most of the bankers I worked with were cynical enough to think that if you could bring a good surprise one day, then you could bring a bad one the next.

But the surprise of renewing relationships, or of planning ahead so that there is time for people and not just the drivenness of getting things done – with five children at home and a church, our Christmas made the average North Sea development seem simple.

The trouble is that I can feel a series of clichés coming on, quite apart from the ones already in this article. It is not easy to make time for people who irritate you out of your mind if you spend too

much time with them. It is worse if one staggers into Christmas with the anticipation of being trapped for 10 days with personal problems – far easier just to hand the presents over, as quickly as possible. Christmas can be a bitter time of disappointment, with January bringing relief and escape. Nor is it a good time for thinking a lot; there is usually too much on.

Which is why I come back to surprises. Planning for relative simplicity is a good principle in most things we do. Complex deals have too many things to go wrong, and usually only benefit the lawyers. Complex projects are almost always misplanned. Over-elaborate plans for the greatest holiday since Prince Albert put up the first Christmas tree at Windsor Castle usually end in unfulfilled expectations.

This year I've got to go to Bethlehem just before Christmas. We've been helping finance a school there, which also acts as a centre of reconciliation in a community in pieces because of the conflicts for the last few years. It is not the best time to be away, from a work point of view, but it's a wonderful time to be reminded of what has value by seeing that community celebrating together, supporting each other. It will be a very realistic trip, and includes meetings with different parties and sides to ensure that listening is done properly. But I rather suspect that the nature of the trip will reinforce the surprises of the holiday period and, for me, Christmas in particular.

One of those surprises, albeit a predictable one, is of seeing again the intrinsic value of the human person. I cannot take anything to the community I will see there, but they still seem to be grateful for a visit. Perhaps this is one thing shared regardless of religious affiliation. Scrooge comes back to the value of those around him, the employees he bullies, the family he insults. It is all sugary but, like much of Dickens' sugar, coats an important pill. This is the restoration of human values amid the pressure of working life, and the willingness to spend time (which is often harder to give than money) that may bring little return.

It might be expected that as a Christian I would think the reality of what happened at Christmas to be transforming. But that is not always for me the surprise, which comes more often from renewed relationships, a repacing of life for a few days, a resetting of the measures of what is of final value.

Trite perhaps, but better in the long term than just a week of (enjoyable) feeding amid acrimony.

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