

On feeling very important



JUSTIN WELBY REFLECTS ON CAR PARKING SPACES, THE SHAPE OF THE TABLE IN YOUR OFFICE AND A LETTER FROM TONY BLAIR.

Being a clergyman has a curious Gilbert and Sullivan feeling about it, especially at Christmas. Like Father Christmas we dress in colourful and impractical clothes (how long would his fur stay white up and down chimneys?) and move around to music that is not otherwise sung. There is a sort of unwritten code in some churches that you should not look too much as if you are enjoying yourself, but being at a cathedral is fun because during December it tends to fill up several times over.

The tricky bit is keeping your feet on the ground (I suppose that also applies to Father Christmas, except that he has to make sure he doesn't keep his feet on the ground). That's even more the case at home this year.

A letter came a few months back, from that nice Mr Blair at 10 Downing Street appointing me to a new job (or suggesting that he would recommend appointment to the Queen). I have to say it beats the days when I used to get a 6pm call from a headhunter asking, "Do you know anyone who might be interested in..?"

It must have been a tough decision. "No, Prime Minister, Iraq and Afghanistan must wait. You really have to decide on the appointment of Welby to Liverpool."

But the letter and the preparation for an installation service at Liverpool Cathedral with all the pomp the Church of England can manage – and we really do pomp(ous) well – made me think about what makes us feel good and important.

Headhunters were a nice boost, even if the job offer might be for treasurer of an air conditioner company with its main sales outlet in Greenland. And doing a big deal was a great boost, especially when it still made sense and I understood the covenants a couple of years later. Corporate activity, equity issues, project finance were better, and best of all was everything coming together in the oil company where I was Group Treasurer, from exploration through financing, development and production.

Companies use all kinds of techniques to distinguish importance. Car parking is a famous one. Office furniture is another. One of my colleagues in business was in a great state because my (small) office had a round table, as did the CFO's. My colleague, though, had a square table in his office. It took hours to persuade him that this grave slight was because only a small round table would fit my small

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round office, suitable for a small round treasurer. These things can become obsessive.

A lot of it is about establishing our sense of pecking order and self-importance. Christmas makes it worse as we lurch from one event to another in the season of peace and goodwill. Presents and cards are often carefully graded, and stop arriving immediately when we leave.

It all felt very solid when I was in the middle of it, and to some extent it still does, which is why I am cautious of the razzmatazz which goes with taking over responsibility for a big cathedral. It appeals to something a bit suspicious, just like a large bond issue or a pioneering financing structure.

Last year, just before Christmas I went to the Middle East as part of the reconciliation and mediation work we do here, and met a friend called Joseph, who is a carpenter working in Bethlehem – honest. He is part of one of the ancient Christian churches in the area, and was caught up in some trouble a few weeks later, when fighting erupted round his home. Everything he had was destroyed. Going back with my 18-year-old son in March we found him starting again, without bitterness or resentment, and working hard at reconciling divisions in his community. At gatherings he stands at the back, and others get the attention and the prizes, but the groups he works with would fall apart without him.

Of course, that all fits the founder of the Christian faith as Christians understand him, born to a poor family, and saying the "first shall be last and the last shall be first". I suspect that my friend Joseph is well ahead of me, and has a better fundamental grasp of ethical principles, for all the fuss and pomp.

Have a good holiday, Christmas and New Year.

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