

Marvel amid the mundane



HOWEVER ORDINARY LIFE MIGHT SEEM, THE APPALLING AND THE AMAZING ARE NEVER THAT FAR AWAY, SAYS **JUSTIN WELBY**.



During 2011 we had the treasurers to dinner at my last office, about 900 of them, in Liverpool Cathedral – a good group and a great office. It was quite an evening, and the variety of treasurer is something to see. They don't come in one size. But some things all will have in common. Everyone knows that we are living in an era of exceptional instability and great threat.

And yet life goes on and things happen in the normal way. In January my boss's boss suggested that I apply for a different job in the Church of England. In February I was reminded. In March he explained that when he said "suggested" I needed to understand that he meant ...

And so I did. By October the packing cases were back in action and rather than writing from the shadows of Liverpool Cathedral I am sitting in Bishop Auckland in County Durham. By the time you have done eight large-scale moves to new areas you know the routine. The packers pack everything, even the half-full wastepaper basket. The dog is disgruntled, even disgusted. The children start saying things like "we're moving over my dead body", catch their mother's eye and realise that she might take that literally. All my old clothes are thrown

away, and HSBC starts banking with us rather than vice versa.

Lots of people reading this will have moved or be about to move. It's normal. Life goes on. As it does in normal times and extraordinary times. We may spend the day struggling with the issues of the euro crisis, but the kids still want to talk about school. Life veers from the extreme to the banal.

And one of the remarkable things about the Christmas story, whether people believe it or not (and I do), is its ordinariness. There's a mother and a baby being born, a dad who is somewhat confused (been there several times), overcrowded hotels, births in strange places, odd people showing up to see what's going on, and above all it is happening in a country at war with an occupying military power. Not quite London SW7, but the stuff of everyday life for vast numbers of people.

Yet the story also contains something of the extreme. The point of the story is that in the midst of the normal, something amazing was happening, shown by sages coming from far away and by angels in the sky. Amazing things as well as terrible things happen in ordinary situations. We work on a vast and complex and company-changing deal, one that will alter the future of thousands of people – and then we fall in

love with someone across the table.

So how do we find stability when we live in a world that pops the tragic, the terrifying and the amazing into the middle of the ordinary, and when the job of a treasurer is almost always at the eye of the storm? It's not a job which often gives time to prepare for crises, and it involves a whole lot of anticipating the future in order to identify, quantify and manage the risks that are on the way.

Stability is not to be found in being right, because none of us is on a consistent basis. Nor is it to be found in risk management, because if there is risk one is always exposed to volatility and black swans.

Stability for ourselves has to be found in something deeper and more solid, which does not change when everything else changes. Obviously as a Christian I believe that stability is only definitively found in Christ. Another man I knew, a Roman Catholic priest, was arrested many years ago, in a country where all religious practice was illegal. He was stripped of his name, his (very senior) rank and all traces of identity, thrown into prison with strangers and held for 13 years without trial. His life remained so stable that it challenged even his guards and torturers and in the end it was the government there that cracked and let him out.

Hopefully we will never face such things, but Christmas should challenge us with our own questions about the sources of our stability, and how solid they are in the midst of the ordinary, the tragic and the amazing.

Have a wonderful break and a good celebration.

The Right Reverend Justin Welby is Bishop of Durham and ACT members' confidential adviser on ethical and personal issues.