

Contents

Foreword	7
Prologue: Remembrance.....	9
Advent Sunday.....	13
John the Baptist	14
Fourth Sunday of Advent: the Virgin Mary.....	17
Carol services.....	20
Holding the baby	22
Epiphany	25
Twelfth Night.....	27
Third Sunday of Epiphany.....	28
Candlemas.....	29
Gifts of the Spirit.....	32
Ash Wednesday	35
Temptations	37
Silence and solitude	39
St David's Day	41
In the desert	43
Mothering Sunday.....	46
Doorkeeping.....	49
Palm Sunday.....	51
Holy Week.....	54
Maundy Thursday.....	56
Good Friday.....	58
Great and Holy Saturday	60
Easter Eve.....	63
Resurrection.....	65
Going back to Galilee (Matthew 28).....	66
Resurrection stories.....	69
The nesting season.....	73

The Latin Communion	75
Local saints	79
Holy Cross.....	82
The shape of the Spirit	84
The Alice sermon	86
Trinity Sunday.....	89
The Trinity season	91
Valerian.....	94
Two church fêtes	96
On the road.....	98
John Henry Newman	101
Flower festival.....	103
Pilgrimages	105
The church in the middle of nowhere.....	107
Neighbours.....	108
In hospital	110
Michaelmas.....	112
Conversations with angels	116
Harvest Festival.....	119
St Frideswide	122
All Saints and All Souls.....	125
Fun Church	128
Bible Sunday.....	131
Endings	134
The gift.....	136

Prologue: Remembrance

It is six o'clock on Remembrance Sunday: my annual visit to the British Legion. I thread the back streets of Littlemore in a fine rain. Street lamps smoulder darkly. Behind them, buildings swim in and out of focus: sheltered accommodation, council houses, low-rise flats. The occasional pedestrian is a bowed silhouette. The local shops are silent, their steel blinds lowered and locked.

The Legion looks like a relic of the war, a squat, square bunker fortified by a wire fence. Inside it is cosy and noisy, more social club than military outpost. I change into cassock and surplice in the office behind the bar, pinning a smart silk poppy to my preaching scarf. Club members of all ages are already seated round the edges of the lounge, whiskies and pints before them on small tables. The elderly are wearing their campaign medals. The young look bored, their parents adamant. Conversation filters in from the games room opposite; a thwack of darts and occasional applause.

We lay two standards on a drum-head altar while Jubilee Brass plays 'O God, our help in ages past'. In the past, the air used to be thick with cigarette smoke—soldiers' incense—bearing our act of remembrance to heaven. I find myself perversely missing it today. The service has a disorganised dignity, casual but heartfelt. Among those here tonight are descendants of men who died in the Boer war, two World Wars and the Falklands—more distant conflicts too, no doubt, which we have forgotten.

We hear part of John 15: 'Greater love hath no man than this...'. I reflect that there is something Christ-like about men and women who lay down their lives for their friends.

What is less often noticed is that there is also something divine about remembering. Human beings are so very afraid of oblivion. To forget, we feel, is to lose what we have forgotten. If we forget enough, we lose ourselves, and others who forget are lost to us. And to be 'lost' is another word for being parted from God. But since it is unbearable to think we could be lost to God, we put our faith in God's good memory. In God, we trust, nothing and no one is lost; no one is overlooked, no one forgotten.

This will be the first year within my memory that the words of remembrance are not spoken by Jim. We lose one of our veterans every year, now. The brave declaration sounds in my ears like a plea. Do not let us forget, Lord, as we grow old and our dead slip further from us. Do not let the busyness of living overtake us till we no longer have time or energy to remember those we have lost, those who lost us, who lost everything for us. Help us to pass on the torch: to touch the imaginations of the young so that what we experienced does not die with us.

The Reveille wakes us from our individual musings and the band leads us in a rousing rendition of 'O valiant hearts'.

The parish of Littlemore, on the south-eastern edge of Oxford, bound to the city and barred from it by the ringroad, is still essentially a village. Its heart is medieval, too young to appear in the Domesday Book but mentioned in the twelfth century as 'Luthlemoria', 'little marsh'. A few ancient stone houses survive among a handful of Victorian brick villas but Littlemore's origins are shrouded in forgetting—as, already, are the beginnings of my relationship with it.

I seem to remember my first visit quite clearly. It was Palm Sunday and I walked in halfway through the service, having forgotten that it began at ten o'clock. But I must be wrong, because Palm Sunday is the one day of the year when the

service begins at eleven. Anyway, that wasn't my first visit. The previous Advent, the vicar had recruited me to form part of a string quartet at the community carol service. Even that wasn't really the beginning because, when my sister and I were children, our parents brought us to church and afterwards to lunch with the then vicar, David Nicholls, and his wife Gilly. She was (and is) a doctor, he an authority on the Caribbean, and they kept a macaw called Archdeacon Paley, who wrote controversial letters to *The Times*. Members of the congregation who are now friends must have been present on each of those occasions but, if I asked now, who would remember? Services overlie each other in the mind year after year, until they are stuck together like old photographs.

Growing up in those days in North Oxford, I knew almost nothing about this side of town. My mental map of the city featured the Woodstock and Banbury Roads, schools and shops and the houses of friends, the colleges where my parents worked, and an eclectic range of places of worship. Under the influence of our father, a theologian by profession and a non-stipendiary priest, Catharine and I attended the local parish church and sang in the church choir. Under the aegis of our mother, who taught the study of religions, we attended Catholic masses and Quaker meetings, and visited synagogues, mosques, gurdwaras, temples and meditation centres. It was a stimulating combination—though, for my parents, their different approaches to religion proved to be one of many incompatibilities and they parted company while we were still children.

When, years later, I came back to Oxford to work, I bought a house on the south-east side of town, and looked for a new parish church to attend. My father, now vicar of Sandford-on-Thames, recommended neighbouring Littlemore and its clergy: a New Testament scholar, John Muddiman, and a

musician, Bernhard Schünemann. ‘You’ll like them,’ he said; ‘you’ll learn from them.’ It proved good advice. There have been other beginnings since, all equally buried in my reliable amnesia for the prime moment: my first sermon, ordination, first celebration of the Eucharist... However hard we try, we forget far more than we remember.

In the days when many clergy stayed in one parish for decades, one of their functions was to remember. They remembered the parents and grandparents of current congregations; the distant cousins; who had been whose friend or enemy. They remembered baptising and marrying many of those whom they buried; they knew who had come to the village as a bride, whose uncle had emigrated and whose grandfather had been killed in war. It all helped to hold the community together. At the moment, in a village like Littlemore, many members of the congregation have longer memories than the clergy—but that too is changing as everyone moves around more. When the present generation has passed away, I wonder whether anyone will be able to look back more than a few years. It is just one of many challenges the parish faces.

Still, I reflect, as I disrobe and stow my poppy carefully away for another year, it is also important to make the most of the present and look forward to the future. I am grateful to be in Littlemore now, playing my small role in the parish and keeping Remembrance Sunday in good company. The band strikes up a dance tune as I let myself out. I cycle home down the Iffley Road against the wind, which means it’s winter. In summer the wind rebuffs you as you cycle up the hill; in winter it’s in your favour. The estates round here have beautiful names: Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys, Minchery Farm. Reality is less idyllic but equally colourful.

Advent Sunday

What are we waiting for? December
dim as church glass; the vase
of my temple dry and flowers
withered. What are we waiting for?
Trees stripped of oracles and grass
bated with ice.

Ask the robin what he knows
to stoke his beacon.
Hollies butting through the hedge
and swaggering mistletoe have their reasons.
What light knocks
where the horizon lifts its lid
and our sky shell is thinnest?

Suns spin like a sovereign down:
will it be soon or late?
Life crouches at the tips of twigs:
make haste.

John the Baptist

There is something satisfying about a really gloomy December; it makes Christmas shine more brightly. Today is doleful enough even for me. Bulging grey skies drizzle greyly on gleaming grey roads. The celebrant borrows my chasuble, which is too small for him but, being made of thick William Morris curtain material, is the warmest we have. It's the third Sunday of Advent, when we celebrate John the Baptist, if 'celebrate' is the right word. Not, perhaps, the most sympathetic character in the Advent story (where he's a bit of an interloper anyway). He's an extremist. When crowds of people come to him to be baptised, he calls them a brood of vipers and accuses them of not being really sorry.

John strikes me as a lonely figure, standing as he does between the old and new covenants. Like the prophets before him, he doesn't like his world, but neither is he destined to change it. He isn't the one for whom everyone is waiting. He is the first man to acknowledge Christ as an adult and, in his lifetime, no one comes closer to understanding Jesus' mission, but he dies without seeing the results of what he helped to start. He preaches repentance and baptism and looks for the coming of the kingdom, but he is never part of Jesus' circle of close friends.

Despite his rebarbative manner, John also invites sympathy because, man of faith that he is, he also experiences doubt. From prison, he sends word to Jesus: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'¹ It seems extraordinary, when all the signs are that he knew Jesus as soon as he met him. Did he not understand some of the things Jesus was doing? Was his faith shaken by his own sufferings?

Whatever the reason, John's doubt reminds us that even the strongest people have moments of weakness—which is encouraging at this time of year, when many people feel oppressed by darkness and uncertainty. John knew that feeling but he also knew the words that he had borrowed from Isaiah: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.'²

Outside, after the service, the sky is practically hanging round our necks. The cedar at the north-western corner of the church looms blackly and drips on people as they emerge. I jump up and down to keep warm. 'You want to go inside,' people say, but I quite like it in the murk. Anyway, it isn't much warmer indoors: two of the heaters are broken and I'm sure the temperature is below the legal minimum for workplaces. (I suppose this doesn't apply to us, as no one counts as an employee here.) Ivy has saved the non-coffee drinker a cup of hot water. 'You get that down you, girl.'

On my way home, I cycle round to the Mobile Home Park to return a tape we used in a funeral last week. I love an excuse to come here—our own model village of miniature castles, set in formal gardens which in summer are brilliant with hanging baskets and bedding plants. The park is technically in Sandford parish and we buried the dead man in his family plot in Sandford churchyard, but, thanks to some feud long pre-dating the present incumbents, the family refused to step inside Sandford church, so the service was held at Littlemore. From one church to the other we processed behind Oxford's only horse-drawn hearse, a Gothic wonder of jet paintwork, gilt and plate glass, stuffed with yellow chrysanthemums

and drawn by four plumed and polished geldings. Walking sedately in its wake over the railway and the dual carriageway, past fields from which ordinary brown and grey ponies gazed in envy, we felt almost Dickensian and, by association, inappropriately but irrepressibly Christmassy.



Fourth Sunday of Advent: the Virgin Mary

Littlemore church is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin, after its mother church, the University Church of Oxford, and to St Nicholas, patron of the nearby Mynchery, the medieval Benedictine nunnery. It is not an old parish, having been founded in the 1830s by John Henry Newman.

When he became vicar of the University Church in 1828, Newman discovered that Littlemore was part of his parish. Since it lay a good three miles from the centre of Oxford up a steep hill, this seemed to him impractical and he set about building it a chapel and a school, with a view to installing a curate there. His mother, who lived nearby on Rose Hill, laid the foundation stone. A plaque commemorates her on the north wall of the aisle: ‘Sacred to the memory of Jemima Newman, who laid the first stone of this chapel, July 21st 1835; and died before it was finished, May 17th 1836, in the 64th year of her age.’ The relief above it shows the angel Gabriel offering a crown to the Virgin Mary against a backdrop of the half-built church. Mary is looking in consternation at a pile of books, which she seems to have dropped when the angel spoke to her. Since, as Newman insisted, this is not an annunciation scene but some evidently later meeting, it seems odd that she looks so surprised.

Visitors do not find it a pretty church, though the chancel may have been designed by Pugin and there are several William Morris windows. It is small, cell-shaped and plain—nothing to compare with the Norman glory of Iffley or the Victorian temples of the Cowley Road. It is built of yellowish

local stone, now rather blackened; a low tower to one side of the chancel houses a calling-bell and a charitably slow clock. Inside, the walls are whitewashed and damp. The east window is supposed to be rather fine and there is some grand Gothic painting in red, blue and gold behind the altar. Apart from Jemima's, the only monuments are war memorials and a brass plaque to David Nicholls, with the Archdeacon on his shoulder. A slender screen, plain pulpit and fixed pews, a wizard's-hat cover over a medieval font (out of the University Church), a boxy organ (out of the old psychiatric hospital) and a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, on the wall opposite Jemima, about complete the decoration.

If you worship here for a while, it looks better and better. You begin to appreciate how perfectly the iron grilles fit into the floor (unlike in so many churches, where they rock and clang). You notice how beadlike strings of colour swing across the walls as the sun shines through the monastically narrow windows. The plain woodwork makes a fine backdrop for flowers. Churches are like people: you have to spend time with them, and then the plainest can be revealed as the most beautiful. Like Mary herself, perhaps—an unexceptional teenager who becomes more and more remarkable as we get to know her.

I preach on Mary as the new Abraham, mother of a new people. Mary's own song of praise links her with Abraham, but she is also very much herself: shrewd, joyful, courageous, humble, a woman who dares to bless the God who has blessed her. Paradoxically, part of being very much herself is that, like the patriarchs and prophets before her, she lets God work through her, so she becomes a blessing.

Letting oneself be used by God is one of the great challenges of spiritual life. Most of us have a fairly strong sense of who we are and how we'd like our lives to be. We want a

certain kind of family or house or car or job; we want to have friends, to be successful or admired or loved. To give up our desires and let God use our lives in ways we might not have planned or wanted is both difficult and frightening. If God sent an angel to us with a life-changing proposition, would we follow Mary's example and say 'yes'?

Who can say? But it is encouraging that in the Bible, letting ourselves be used by God never means becoming less ourselves. If anything, holy men and women, from Abraham to Moses, Elijah to Esther to Jesus himself, are larger than life, more fully themselves than those around them. The Spirit does not blow our selves away; it blows through the shape of us, using our qualities and personalities for divine ends. Jesus says, 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'³ Paul adds that 'there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'⁴

Mary's life-changing 'yes' to God—'Let it be with me according to your word'⁵—sets the agenda and poses the challenge of Advent. Come Christmas, we shall talk not only of the blessing God offers us but also of the blessing we give God and the blessing we hope to become for other people. It takes courage to let ourselves be used, but those who manage it—all generations call them blessed.



Carol services

It is axiomatic that carol services bring people together, so we have plenty. The Advent carol service on Advent Sunday is followed by the St Nicholas' Day procession on 6 December, the ecumenical community carol service a week or so before Christmas, the Christingle service and the blessing of the crib, not to mention carol services for schools and retirement homes. Sometimes Sandford church choir puts on a seasonal oratorio, too. There is a primitive thrill about arriving in darkness and finding the church ablaze with light and buzzing with conversation.

At the community carol service, despite the presence of such local dignitaries as councillors, head teachers and scout leaders, the atmosphere is more music festival than liturgy. There may be contributions from any or, with luck, all of a school choir, a folk group, a gospel choir and a string quartet. Paul, local music teacher and showman extraordinary, teaches the congregation a four-part round which he has written for the occasion. His accompaniment shakes dust out of the roof carvings. During Bernhard's incumbency, the Christmas tree was decorated with red wooden apples and real candles. Now that Margreet is our vicar, it wears white bows. Churchwarden Sue lurks behind it with a fire extinguisher.

The head of the local Muslim girls' school joins us and reads the story of the annunciation from the Koran. When he's read it in English, he reads a section in Arabic. The congregation is very quiet, a little overawed. Is this religious dialogue or something more profound? We don't know where we're going with it, only that we like and respect each other.

This year we have a new contribution from a group of

Egyptian Copts who have been holding services in the church on Saturdays. What romance the name of Egypt evokes! The birthplace of monasticism; home of our oldest texts of the Gospels and some of our earliest hymns and liturgies; source of some of the most creative theology of the early Church. I point out to anyone who will listen that although it is distant in time and space, Egyptian monasticism is particularly close to us in spirit, having inspired British missionaries like David and Columba. Our Egyptian friends read a passage from the Bible and sing a hymn in Coptic, to a plangent eastern melody.

There is a dark side to our celebrations. In recent years, there has been trouble with teenagers in the village, vandalising cars, breaking windows and throwing stones at people in the street. Now some of the congregation no longer go out after dark, even to carol services or midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

The next day, I visit Mary in one of the group homes attached to the psychiatric hospital. Just beyond them, where the road curves round towards Sandford, is the bridge over the ringroad from which people occasionally attempt suicide. Mary jumped off it a couple of years ago and achieved not oblivion but only intensive care, where she remained for many months. Now she is out, she's hoping to come to church again, and she hasn't given up hope of reading Theology at Oxford. Carols from King's float out of her radio, sounding a long way off. The choristers sing a medieval carol about another Mary who was 'makeless'—mateless and matchless.⁶ We make an altar out of a chair and share Communion sitting on the bed. The difference between aloneness and loneliness, between community and community care, hovers uneasily in the air between us.