

Advent again! Was it really a whole year ago that we were all scratching our heads over what might be possible for Christmas; hoping, despite all mounting evidence, that our carols and Christingles would not go down the virtual pan in the way that Easter celebrations had? This year I'm sure I'm not alone in dreaming of Christmas presence. Much as worshipping zoomily has been a connecting blessing in a time of disconnection and isolation, I'm really looking forward to being gathered around the Table (Communion and dinner) fully present to one another in the flesh.

Even though our St Michael's pop-up nativity was (bizarrely) broadcast over ASDA FM up and down the country last year, I'd far rather be standing with a dodgy mic in the foyer of Sheerwater's store, seeing the puzzled shoppers, excited children and our hardworking shopkeepers singing along to old favourites; lips and sound completely in sync as we tell the story of the God who refused to remain virtual but insisted on bodily presence amongst us all.

I wonder how what we have been through will change our approach to Advent this year? Will our preparations for Christmas be more tentative? Will we carefully choose the few we wish to be present to? After all, we know that this pandemic is not over. Alternatively, will what we missed last year, drive us to aim for bigger, 'better' celebrations – everyone present around the table, even though, for many, grief will be the most unwelcome guest?

To add to the dissonance, it's at this time of year that the Church calendar seems most out of sync with the world we live in. Like some bad Zoom meeting, society is busy telling us to party while we're still trying to contemplate the serious implications of God-with-us, then just as we're ready to ring the bells and sing for joy and start the Christmas season, the rest of the world has peaked and is settling down to snooze off the excess in front of the telly. By the time we're ready to declare Christmas is over, the first Easter eggs will almost certainly be on the shelves, alongside hot cross buns.

Despite (or maybe because of) this out of 'sync-ness', there will undoubtedly be holy moments, found in unlikely places. Just as our Lord pitched up somewhat unexpectedly into a chaotic social and political scene for the first nativity, I know he will show up again and again in ordinary lives, causing discomfort and rattling our little cages, poking the divine nose into places we'd rather God kept out of and proving once again that Covid 19 (or any other evil) is no match for THE Christmas presence. It's what God does. The problem is that in our busy, burdened lives, we might not notice. We might be too busy planning services or buying presents, digging out tea towels for shepherd-children or tracking down that turkey to notice that glorious moment when the Spirit spreads

her wings over us and whispers the truth that Jesus is here, right now, in the conversation you nearly didn't have, with the person you'd hoped to avoid, with the Big Issue seller or the slightly drunk colleague, the relative nobody wanted to host or the weary shop-keeper you barely registered. The warning from Hebrews 13 rings down the ages: Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. It could be anyone but if we hear that whisper in the most inconvenient moment and can pause long enough for God to reveal it, we will know that this moment is a gift: that's why we call it the present.

May God grant us the ability to loiter without intent in this busy season.

Reverend Gillaine Holland

*Leader of the Bishop's Mission Order at St Michael's Shared Church,
Sheerwater*