THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

THE TABLET

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Plus belle encore

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The drab but glorious Attlee years

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The waves Marconi made

THE TABLET
THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY
FOUNDED IN 1840

ASSISTED DYING

THE DEVIL LIES IN THE DETAIL

The wisdom of the past sometimes speaks to the modern world. By granting a second reading to a bill which in principle allows a person with terminal illness to be helped to die by suicide, the House of Commons has pushed aside the wise old adage that "hard cases make bad law". It has crossed a red line. In so doing, it now has to face another wise old adage, that "the devil lies in the detail". The first maxim means that laws designed to deal with extremes can sometimes undermine principles which provide a general benefit or safeguard to everyone. In this case, the general principle is the absolute respect for life, sometimes referred to as the sacredness or sanctity of life, though the apparent religious connotation is often misrepresented. Whether from evolution or revelation, it appears to be hard-wired.

The second says that it is only in trying to design a legal framework to implement Parliament's intention that it will become clear if the intention is workable – that is to say, whether it is possible to limit the scope of the change to the narrow band of cases that MPs had in mind. If the process of amplifying and amending details of the bill does not produce a satisfactory outcome, some MPs who voted in favour of it may change their minds, rather than continue to support a bad law.

The House of Commons debate, resulting in a majority in favour of the bill of 55, was largely won by hard cases. A succession of MPs described heart-rending stories that constituents, or family and friends, had told them about. They described how patients had begged to be released from unbearable suffering to which there seemed to be virtually no end, with the release of death still some months away. These were cases where available methods of pain control had cruelly defeated the doctors administering them. The argument here was not one of autonomy but of mercy and compassion.

It was very powerful, but it contains a warning. The concept of "unbearable suffering" is subjective. It cannot be measured or verified. This may be why the bill does not mention it, though it is the main reason the bill was approved. And it has to be said that the most common counter-argument, that individuals might be under pressure to end their lives from relatives or just from circumstances, also rested on hard cases. What if a relative stood to gain financially from the death of the patient? What if the terminally ill patient felt they were being a burden, either on their family or on other patients waiting for a bed, or indeed on the NHS in general?

The bill itself contains safeguards, said to be stricter than in any similar legislation in the world. Two doctors would have to certify that the patient asking to be assisted to die was terminally ill with less than six months to live, that they were of sound mind, and that they were not being pressured or coerced. A High Court judge would then have to certify that these criteria had been met. And there are intervals built into the process to allow changes of mind. But what looks like objective certainty is nothing of the kind. Estimates of how long a patient has to live are little more than expert guesses, and the very phrase "terminal illness" is indefinable.

Mental capacity is equally slippery: clinical depression, which may be present in someone seriously ill, generally needs to be diagnosed by a mental health specialist. Is it relevant to mental capacity or not? What about dementia, mild or otherwise? The law will have to specify. As to the presence or absence of coercion, how is a doctor to know? How will they be able to detect if someone is being pressured or nudged into killing themselves? If one doctor refuses to certify that the conditions have been met, the patient may shop around for another. How many attempts are they allowed? Who supplies the list of doctors? Must the patient's GP be consulted?

> The concept of 'unbearable suffering' is subjective. It cannot be measured or verified

And if the doctor's job is difficult, the judge's is virtually impossible, unless they just rubber-stamp what the doctors say. Will they meet the patient in person, or call the doctors before them? Should they consult next of kin and other relatives? On oath? Will there be a hearing? Will lawyers be involved? Will there be an appeals process? Who will pay? Will end-of-life cases get priority? Will judges be allowed to opt out for reasons of conscience, which is something the judiciary has never countenanced before? Will this produce a small core of doctors and judges who specialise in assisted dying cases? And, if so, what is to stop such a group being dominated by those with an ideology of personal autonomy who will say Yes to every request? That is what happened with the Abortion Act, where two doctors are supposed in theory to certify that the pregnant woman meets the medical criteria. In practice no case is ever refused.

So what looks like an admirably solid system of safeguards may quickly begin to crumble. All this has to be examined in detail before the bill comes back for a third reading. What Parliament decided, with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan, could be described as moving the response to the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" from "Never" to "Hardly ever", and viewing them as so similar as to be approximately the same. They are not. "Never" and "Hardly ever" exist in two entirely different moral universes. Yet neither of them grants an individual the total autonomy over the choice to live or die that secular humanists have long campaigned for; the terms of the bill before Parliament represent a clear defeat for them.

But nor is "Never" an unambiguously religious position – liberal Protestants, for instance, may prefer "Hardly ever". "Never" is closer to the Catholic ethos. Those from that perspective must now seek to make the bill as strict as possible, not to sabotage it, but with the paradoxical aim of showing that what the House of Commons wanted is not in fact achievable, with the best will in the world and no matter how carefully the redrafting is done. The ultimate conclusion is likely to be that Parliament must decide to legalise voluntary euthanasia in all cases – or none. There is no halfway house, and never was.

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PHOTO: ALAMY/ZUMA, MARWAN NAAMANI



25 Volunteers in Beirut prepare to clear debris and rubble from bombarded streets

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Out of the flames, into the light

After a remarkable restoration, Notre-Dame, Paris's great Gothic cathedral, prepares to welcome worshippers for the first time since the 2019 fire that almost destroyed it / **By BRENDAN McCARTHY**

PHOTO: ALAMY/AP, CHRISTOPHE PETIT TESSON



AS DUSK FALLS today, Archbishop of Paris Laurent Ulrich will knock three times with his episcopal staff on Notre-Dame's west door. In response, the *Maîtrise*, the cathedral's choir, will chant a verse from Psalm 122 ("I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'"). At the third knock, the door will open wide to reveal Notre-Dame reborn, restored and wreathed in light.

It will be an end of exile as Paris reclaims its cathedral and Notre-Dame's organ (one of Europe's finest) resounds for the first time in five years. Priests, vested in chasubles designed for the reopening by the couturier Jean-Charles de Castelbajac, will walk in procession into a startlingly luminous nave (the word *blondeur* best describes the effect). Notre-Dame's former crepuscular light is gone. The walls, built in the eleventh century with limestone quarried near Paris, have been cleansed of the grime of centuries.

Inside the west door, the procession will skirt Guillaume Bardet's striking baptismal font in bronze, newly commissioned. After the organ is blessed (and "reawakened") there will be an office of readings, the *Magnificat* will be sung, and the service will end with Benediction and *Te Deum*.

Saturday's congregation will be the first at Notre-Dame since the fire. During evening Mass on 15 April 2019, an alarm sounded, and security staff cleared the cathedral. Soon a fiery rain of molten lead and steel cascaded on to the sanctuary as Notre-Dame's spire (*flèche*) collapsed. Parisians watched horrified on the banks of the Seine as the stricken cathedral lay helpless before the flames. Firefighters risked their lives to stop the fire reaching the belfry of the north tower. Had it collapsed, it would have been the end for Notre-Dame.

> A fiery rain of molten lead and steel cascaded on to the sanctuary as Notre-Dame's spire collapsed

The collapse of the *flèche* destroyed the main altar below. Extraordinarily, a statue of the Virgin (*La Vierge du Pilier*), just feet away, survived. Many said it was a miracle. The *Vierge* has spent these last years in exile, alongside Notre-Dame's priests, *Maîtrise*, and organists, at the church of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois near the Louvre.

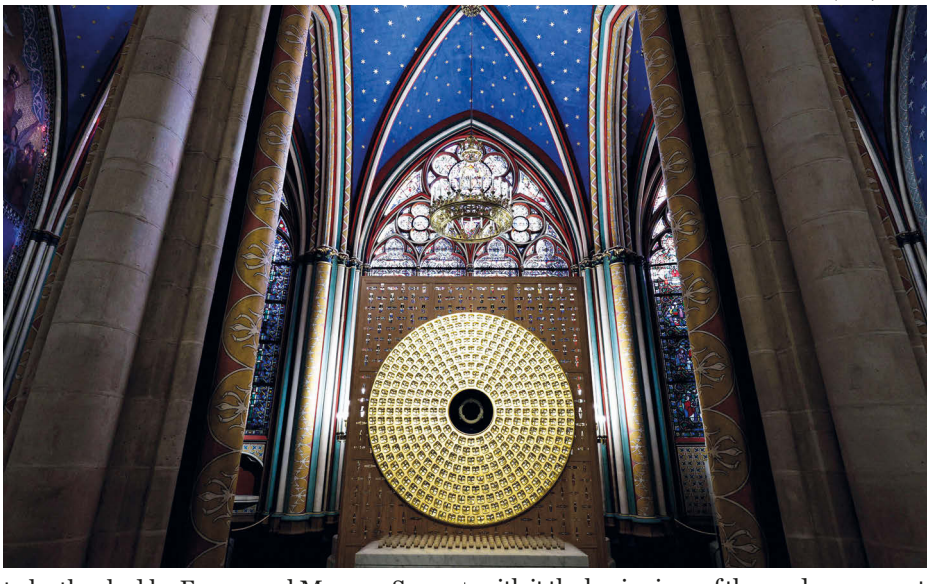
She returned to Notre-Dame two weeks ago in an emotionally charged torchlight procession and is back in her due place beside the new main altar (which like the baptistry and lectern – all in bronze – is also designed by Guillaume Bardet). Archbishop Ulrich will dedicate the altar at a solemn Mass tomorrow morning and this will be followed by a buffet lunch for the poor and homeless of Paris.

The French state owns Notre-Dame, and after the fire President Emmanuel Macron promised that the cathedral would be restored within five years *plus belle encore* ("more beautiful than before"). Macron has defied all who doubted him. Recent presidents have left Paris a legacy of *grand projets*; the Pompidou Centre, the Louvre Pyramid, the Musée d'Orsay. Notre-Dame's restoration is surely Macron's *grand projet*, mostly realised by the formidable General Jean-Louis Georgelin, who died last year.

THE QUESTION was whether to rebuild Notre-Dame essentially as it had been, or to run an architectural competition for a new spire and interior (one option was for an altar in the nave with banks of choir-style seating). Macron and some of Paris's clergy favoured the latter. But Notre-Dame's former rector, Patrick Chauvet, along with the head of France's office of public works, and a vocal heritage lobby, wanted a cathedral *à l'identique*. They won, in part, because endless

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PHOTO: ALAMY/ABACA, STEPHANE



Left: President Emmanuel Macron is given a preview of the restored Notre-Dame by Archbishop Laurent Ulrich and his staff. Right: a new reliquary for the Crown of Thorns designed by artist Sylvain Dubuisson

cultural skirmishes over a big modernisation would have meant a long delay.

Macron is a weakened president since his disastrous dissolution of France's National Assembly earlier this year. But he is conscious of symbolic power and exercises it where he can. According to the French weekly *Le Point*, he proposed a ceremony in the nave of Notre-Dame (before the reopening) at which he would return the cathedral's keys to Archbishop Ulrich.

Ulrich was unhappy, says *Le Point*. In his eyes, the diocese had never yielded possession. Which in a way is true. Throughout the closure, the archbishop, and his predecessor had held vigils in the ruins of Notre-Dame to mark Holy Week and Advent. Instead, Macron will make a short speech in front of the cathedral just before the reopening ceremony.

THE CATHEDRAL will reopen fully to the general public on 16 December. Visiting times can be reserved a day ahead on Notre-Dame's website. Fifteen million people came annually before the fire, making Notre-Dame the most visited place in France. The culture minister, Rachida Dati, recently proposed that Notre-Dame's tourist visitors pay €5 (£4.10) to enter (with no charge for worshippers). Such a tax, she said, would help restore other religious buildings in France.

The Church won't accept such a tax. "We welcome everyone without distinction, whether they be believers or not," says Olivier Scache, Notre-Dame's vice-rector. "Because I come from a non-practising family, I am very aware of the many reasons why people come here. Notre-Dame is not a museum protected by plexiglass," he told a podcast hosted by the Catholic daily *La Croix*, "but a space to reflect, to feel free and to approach God."

At the height of reconstruction, as many as 600 craftsmen were simultaneously working on the building: carpenters, stonemasons, joiners using traditional skills to restore the work of their medieval antecedents. Days before the reopening, Notre-Dame remained a building site. Part of it will be so for years, with restoration work ahead on the cathedral's flying buttresses and *chevet* (east face), which was already in poor condition before the fire.

Such a large and convivial community of crafts is a rare thing, and the Notre-Dame construction "village" came to be a place of joy and an expression of deep pride in the quality of French craftsmanship. Some, like the builders of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, carved their names, perhaps a personal mark or "tag", in some cases a prayer, into the cut stone and wooden beams. "It's not about pride," one roofer told the daily *Le Parisien*, "We don't do it for ourselves, but we leave a mark so that those who follow us in years to come can trace the work to its maker." Last Saturday hundreds of them filed into the nave to be thanked by Emmanuel Macron. Some of have even formed a *chœur des bâtisseurs* (builders' choir) and will sing at a Mass for patrons of the cathedral on Tuesday evening.

Work inside Notre-Dame is continuing up to the last minute. There is little time to rehearse the reopening ceremonies. The organist Olivier Latry has been barely able to explore how sound travels in the restored cathedral. "I feel joy mixed with apprehension," he told Radio France Musique. The organ, undamaged in the fire, has been cleaned of lead dust pollution. But Latry worries about the acoustics. "They are not as they were before, and we organists will have to adapt to that. While the reverberation time is the same, the sound seems to resonate differently. We can't really tell so far, as the cathedral isn't yet in its finished state."

A notable absentee will be Pope Francis. Next Saturday, curiously, he will visit another French diocese, Ajaccio in Corsica, for a conference on "popular piety in the Mediterranean basin". Cardinal François-Xavier Bustillo, Ajaccio's archbishop, denied to *Le Figaro* that this was a snub to Notre-Dame. But many in the French Church see it as exactly that. Perhaps Francis was repelled by the political theatre (which Donald Trump's anticipated presence will no doubt add to).

If Francis could ever visit Notre-Dame as a simple pilgrim, he would find there plenty of the "popular piety" he will celebrate in Ajaccio. Notre-Dame takes seriously its Marian calling. *Salve Regina* is sung after every Mass; the Marian feasts are marked with Lourdes-like intensity; there is a constant stream of prayerful visitors before the *Vierge*'s statue, where, famously, the poet Paul Claudel experienced his moment of conversion.

It is undoubtedly true that Church and State co-exist at Notre-Dame. The rector, Olivier Ribadeau Dumas, speaks of its "double vocation", one sacred, the other secular. Popular affection for the cathedral is often rooted less in its Catholicism than in Victor Hugo's 1831 novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, which both inscribed the cathedral in the popular imagination and inspired a new fascination with medieval and Gothic architecture, and with it the beginnings of the modern concept of *patrimoine* or national heritage. Because Notre-Dame is at once a Catholic shrine and a national monument, the fire and near destruction was experienced as a deep wound.

Many felt it personally and this meant Notre-Dame could draw on a wellspring of goodwill in its hour of need. French men and women contributed €260 million (£216m), while major donations from French businesses and from around the world brought the total to €843m (£699m). For a divided France (riven by the *gilet jaune* protests six months before the fire), Notre-Dame's restoration was a project around which the country could unify. All, believers or not, could speak of *notre cathédrale*.

FEW OTHER great buildings could have evoked such a visceral response from so many. Perhaps the art historian Kenneth Clark best explained why. He opened his landmark 1969 BBC television series *Civilisation* with a piece to camera against the backdrop of Notre-Dame's *chevet*. "What is civilisation?" Clark asked, "I can't define it in abstract terms." Turning to face Notre-Dame, he continued, "but I think I can recognise it when I see it. And I am looking at it now."

Notre-Dame is a complicated part of Catholic civilisation, compromised by its "double vocation" to live on the fault line between the Church and the world. Yet it remains an undeniably sacred space. As Olivier Scache explains: "However many people are around you, you can feel alone with God in the cathedral." On that fateful evening in 2019, countless millions held their breaths in horror as that sacred space was sundered and Notre-Dame almost lost to us. Immense is the gratitude this weekend that *Notre-Dame est sauvée et plus belle que jamais*.

Live coverage today (1600 GMT) and tomorrow (0930 GMT) on France's Catholic channel KTO: ktotv.com, youtube.com/@ktotv/streams

Brendan McCarthy is a former arts editor of The Tablet.

The postwar period is remembered by one highly respected journalist and historian as anxious, drab – and glorious / **By PETER HENNESSY**

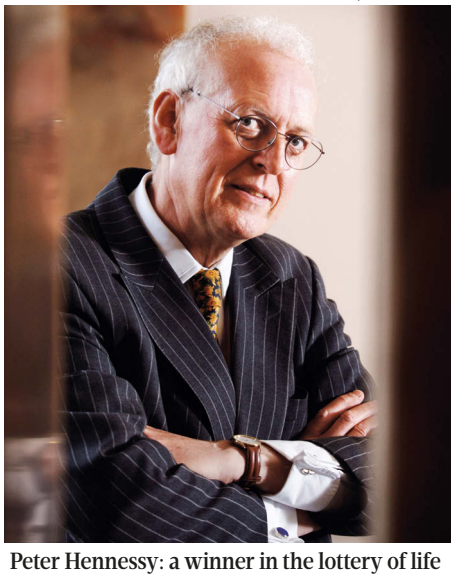
Mr Attlee's child

AS A LONG, FREEZING, snowbound winter crept into a thaw, I came into the world on the evening of Friday 28 March 1947 in the North Middlesex Hospital alongside the North Circular Road in Edmonton, London. I arrived courtesy of a caesarean section cut into my mum, Edith, by a surgeon, Mr Purdy, whose name she often gratefully invoked as part of one of her most highly polished stories across the years until she died aged 80 in 1986.

She was over 40, unwell and suffering from high blood pressure when she had me. It was a close-run thing, which mercifully for me and my three older sisters – Kathleen, Terry and Maureen – she survived. She discovered later that my dad, Bill, and our parish priest in Whetstone, Fr Gerry Ryan (a glorious man and great friend of our family) had discussed who should be saved in the event of a catastrophe – Mum or me. That they did so without consulting her naturally scarred her memory of an event which otherwise would always bring on a huge beaming smile (she rather specialised in these) when she recalled it, particularly when I passed through the stages in life she had not expected to see: primary school; secondary school; university; marriage; children of my own. I'm curious still about certain aspects of my arrival. Did Dad and Fr Ryan decide that, if it came to it, I should survive? I rather think they did (and I have a faint memory of Mum telling me so many years later).

As the (almost) site of my birth, the A406 acquired a special place in our family history. The North Circular Road has a permanent niche in the map room of my mind as a kind of British equivalent of Route 66, the legendary gateway to the American West (though its poetry seems lost on those to whom I have mentioned this comparison). Over those years I have travelled in an arc of about four and half miles round the sacred A road to Walthamstow, where I have lived since 1973. Now, as I write, I am being treated for an old man's complaint in that very same North Middlesex Hospital. A beautiful symmetry in its own north-east London-ish way.

PHOTO: ALAMY, ADRIAN SHERRATT



Peter Hennessy: a winner in the lottery of life

What kind of Britain was I born into? What was it the heavens were telling the night Mr Purdy did his stuff for Mum and me? A quick reading of *The Times* for Saturday 29 March 1947 (then the proud paper of record – a claim it still sustained when I joined it in 1974) throws up still more symmetries that have run through my span living on our cherished damp islands in the cold northern seas.

As Britain thawed, the Cold War was chilling in Moscow, where a foreign ministers' conference was falling out over the future of Germany in the early stages of the great, 40-year East–West confrontation which so shaped my early and middle years – and now, in my twilight years, the new cold war has turned hot in Ukraine.

The perpetual anxiety about the productivity and performance of the British economy was reflected in those pages as *The Times* strove to be cheerful about the Labour government's creation of a new Central Economic Planning Staff headed by Sir Edwin Plowden, a businessman with wartime Whitehall experience. The eternal row about the boundary between the public and private sectors found its niche in an advert paid for by the Big Four railway companies – the Great Western; the London and North Eastern; the London, Midland and Scottish; and the Southern – plus the Road Haulage Association: "DANGER", it read, "Is THIS the time to Nationalise Transport?" It was. British Railways came into existence on 1 January 1948.

Imperial stresses were felt in the pages of *The Times* too. Disposing of the huge territorial Empire was to be bound up with the life of the country of my birth for the next 30 years. The paper reported growing and bloody tensions in the Punjab in soon-to-be-partitioned India. Yet the dash for the exit in Africa, South-east Asia and the Caribbean was plainly not in the forefront of the Whitehall minds who were, as reported that day, preparing to purchase the old Westminster Hospital site opposite Westminster Abbey on which to build a new Colonial Office, where the QEII Centre stands today (the cuts following the 1949 devaluation of the pound took care of that project).

But the lead story in what *The Times* then called its "Imperial and Foreign" pages



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Clement Attlee faces a crowd cheering his 1945 election victory. His wife Violet stands behind

involved another figure who was to be a continuous presence throughout the bulk of my life: Princess Elizabeth, who, with her sister, Margaret, and her father and mother, the King and Queen, were on their celebrated tour of South Africa aboard the White Train. The paper's "Special Correspondent" (no bylines in those days) reported, in language that was of its time and place, from Westaffin, where some 2,000 labourers from the local fruit farms waited to greet the royal party in a hollow semi-circle facing the railway line along which the White Train was to roll:

About 50 dancers, including a few women, all wearing the gayest possible costumes with ostrich feathers dyed brilliant colours, the men carrying shields and brandishing knobkerries, went tirelessly through a long succession of native dances. Hour after hour they kept it up, stimulated by a steady rhythm of a tom-tom.

Later the royal party visited a tropical fruit research station. The special correspondent's tastebuds lost all control at this point and his pen hymned the praise of "this great fruit-growing area, whose citrus, tomato and mango, guava and pawpaw and other fruit do so much to make this whole country seem to visitors from rationed England a land incredibly flowing with milk and honey".



THE STAR

ELECTION RESULTS

A LABOUR LANDSLIDE

Caretaker Govt. Leaders Fall Like Ninepins

TORY PARTY CHAIRMAN IS DEFEATED: MORRISON, BEVIN AND CHURCHILL IN

STATE OF PARTIES

GOVERNMENT

OPPOSITION

GAINS & LOSSES

Shares Drop

WAITING FOR 13

RATIONED BRITAIN, though still an imperial nation, was much more obsessed with its alimentary canal than it was with the Suez Canal. The slightest change in the food regime would get into the paper. Here's the bit that did while *Times* subeditors shaped the paper on the evening of 28 March 1947, as I prepared to make an entrance:

The Minister of Food has made an Order, which comes into force tomorrow, revising prices for imported tinned meats, home-packed meat paste in 3 oz and 6½ oz tins, and imported salami sausages. The amending order also makes provision for the use of fat of vegetable origin in the manufacture of beef sausage, beef sausage meat and beef slicing sausage.

This then was the gloriously drab Britain into which I was born. Glorious because the country had resolutely held firm throughout nearly six years of total war, for one of which we had stood alone with the British Empire against the Axis powers. I would later come to cherish a line from the great economist John Maynard Keynes that, in 1940-41, Britain had "thrown good housekeeping to the winds, but we saved ourselves and we helped save the world".

No first-rank great power has ever shed the "super" bit of its powerdom to such critical and enduring effect. We lost a third of our wealth in doing it and wore ourselves out – hence the noble drabness of the late 1940s, with its food rationing, its shabby clothes, its run-down railway system, its bomb-damaged streets, its fuel and power crises, the strain on its economy, its currency and its balance of payments, which stretched the great Labour government of 1945–51 to its limits.

Yet to be one of Mr Attlee's children turned out to be a winning ticket in the lottery of life. No generation has been better cared for than mine – a source of profound and perpetual gratitude on my part. Though it is thankfulness tinged with regret that subsequent generations have not been so fortunate in terms of the investments the state put into them and the lives and life chances open to them. We children of the early postwar period were better fed, housed and kept healthy than any generation that had come before. The males of our cohort did not have to put on uniform and fight unless we became professional soldiers, sailors or airmen (we were too young to do National Service). We were the first generation to grow up beneath the shadow of the nuclear mushroom cloud. We never entirely got used to that but we coped, and though brinks were sometimes reached, international tensions never slipped into the catastrophe of a third world war. We had a bias towards optimism and what seemed a well-founded belief in incremental improvement – we were, if not a golden generation, certainly a gilt-edged one.

No generation has been better cared for than mine – a source of gratitude ... thankfulness tinged with regret

One way of depicting a generation is to think in terms of the banner upon which were embroidered the shared aspirations that its parents and grandparents had for it. As part of my reflective state of mind as Brexit neared, I was powerfully struck by just how lustrous was the banner under which I grew up and, to be honest, beneath which I still live and breathe in my seventies. Savour its embroidery, for in my judgement it reflects a second finest hour in the 1940s to rank alongside the one that saved us in the Battle of Britain and the year of standing alone that followed. It was the result of a deliberate choice, and was not forced upon them as had been the great moment of shared endeavour following the fall of France in June 1940, which created perhaps the most glorious collective national endeavour in the nation's history. The second Forties banner came out of the experience of total war and lay at the heart of the postwar consensus, which so powerfully shaped the lives of my generation:

- The 1942 Beveridge Report, blueprinting a comprehensive welfare state for the postwar period
- The 1944 Full Employment White Paper, committing all the political parties to avoiding a repeat of the interwar economic slump.
- The Education Act 1944, providing secondary education to all for the first time.
- The National Health Service from 1948, free to all at the point of delivery.
- The creation of Nato in 1949, placing a roof of collective security over the UK and its western allies in the Cold War.
- The start of the shift from Empire to Commonwealth.

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All presided over by those most celebrated constitutional monarchs, George VI and Elizabeth II.

I have long felt favoured by my professional lives having given me two goes at making sense of the banner of my country's lived experience, both as it first unfurled (as a journalist) and later reliving many of the same events in relative tranquillity laced with a dash of perspective (as a historian).

When preparing *Winds of Change*, my study of Britain in the early Sixties, it was as if a past and, in many cases, long-dead generation had opened the door and invited me to come back and move in with them for a few years, greeting me with the words: "How nice to see you again. Let's talk about the old days. There are certain things we couldn't tell you at the time. But take a look at these old, once top-secret papers, and here's a fragment of a diary you might be interested in."

I SUPPOSE I AM a nostalgist, but a nostalgist with a purpose. I want to recapture. Even though I wasn't born until 1947, the early postwar period is familiar enough to do that. I can remember what it felt like. I remember rationing, I remember never being entirely warm in the winter. I remember Dad living off the state. We never had quite enough money for things. My sisters were extraordinarily jolly and I was so lucky to have them – but I can remember how drab it all was.

I can still smell pre-Clean Air Act London, which was dirty all the time but at its worst during the smogs: all that sulphur from the coal fires in every home, in the power stations, in the ubiquitous steam locomotives. They felt so clingy. The Thames stank of oil and sewage. I can still see the Liverpool Overhead Railway that ran along the docks and remember what it was like to cross the Clyde on the Erskine Ferry. I caught the end of nineteenth-century Britain. It was a scene that was to go, but it would have been recognisable right back to the 1880s. As an evoker of memory, snatches of music or smells do it better than anything. When you catch the smell of coal smoke on a damp November breeze, you're back there.

If you're writing for those who came on that journey as well as those who were never there, you want to give them that coal smoke, the freeze of '63, the sound of the shunting engines. You want people to have a sniff, have a listen, as they ask, "Why was it like that?"

Edited extract from On the Back of an Envelope: A Life in Writing (Haas Publishing, £30; Tablet price, £27).

Peter Hennessy, Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History at Queen Mary University of London, is the author of the classic postwar trilogy Never Again: Britain 1945–1951, Having it So Good: Britain in the Fifties and Winds of Change: Britain in the Early Sixties. He was made an independent crossbench life peer in 2010.

LIZ DODD

In the spirit of investigative journalism, I went looking online for an AI Jesus



BLESS ME, ROBOT, for I have sinned.

I am very taken with the news that a church in Switzerland has installed an artificial intelligence (AI) Jesus to hear confessions. Lest the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith hear about this and freak out, a few words of reassurance: it is an experiential art work created by a curious theologian at St Peter's Chapel in Lucerne.

It was not intended to be sacramental, and – really – it wasn't intended to prompt confession. But that just seems to be what passersby did when confronted with "a long-haired image of Jesus beamed through latticework", as *The Guardian* put it.

Robot Jesus responds in real time, which is more than I sometimes get from The Man Himself. In the spirit of investigative journalism I went looking online for an AI Jesus to talk to: the only one I could find responded with random lines from the King James version of the Bible. I asked Robot Jesus what he made of the situation in the Middle East, and he responded with a passage from Luke 16 on divorce, which was either a *non sequitur* or so deep I missed the point.

Swiss AI Jesus is a lot more nuanced, according to reports, although Anna Jungen, a reporter for Swiss broadcaster SRF, was put off from the start because he greeted her as brother. "Jesus recognises my voice but not my gender," she wrote. Welcome to the Catholic Church, I thought, particularly this week, when the lectionary foisted on us by the bishops' conference launched across England and Wales.

Early adopters have told me that the shift in translation from the Jerusalem Bible to the English Standard Version: Catholic Edition has not resulted in as much gender exclusive language as I feared. I still think it is a little much that parishes had to produce some £1,000 per full set and, presumably, pulp the perfectly serviceable books we used right up until the beginning of Advent.

IT WILL PROBABLY be a while before one of Elon Musk's Tesla bots trundles on to the sanctuary to preside, but it is interesting to see the spaces where the technological is encroaching on the spiritual. The undeniably popular Hallow app, of guided meditations and broadly traditional prayers, has been spamming me about its Advent programme. Strangely this seems to be led by Gwen Stefani, of the millennial pop hit "Rich Girl", which, given Hallow's mysterious cloud of right-leaning financial backers, she must be now.

Meanwhile the Women's Ordination Conference has called on Catholic women to strike during Lent 2025 by withholding labour – lectoring, catechesis, cleaning – and by attending women-led gatherings instead of a traditional parish Mass. "Women are the lifeblood of the Church […] Instead of waiting for a papal 'Yes', we issue forth our 'No'," they explain.

I back this call wholeheartedly. Admittedly my strike will not make much difference, because our parish priest is already inclusive, creative and committed to lay leadership. But if, across the Church, women readers, eucharistic ministers, Sunday school teachers, greeters and singers went on strike – what would be left?

The problem for women – for lay people in general – is that the more we boundary and deify the priestly ministry, the less we see ourselves reflected in it. We assume that people use apps, live streams and online services because they are more convenient; but maybe it's because we're looking for people like us?

Maybe people prefer to pray with their smartphone because it is stuffed with their kin and their church isn't? Maybe women feel safer confessing to an AI than to a man? If women do withdraw their labour – if all lay people did – we would discover the boundaries of priestly ministry. And by that point, we might all be using our smartphones anyway.

I FEEL A LITTLE sad that most people, on encountering Jesus in AI form, immediately felt like they needed to make a confession. What would you do if you walked into Jesus? Genuflect? Is that normal between beloved? It feels like the Church is approaching a reckoning point: networked and communicative lay people across the global Church are not afraid of the intangible power wielded by the male hierarchy. We are online, on strike, in pews, and either we will become the priesthood, or there will be no priesthood.

Liz Dodd is a sister of St Joseph of Peace.

Is it time to tear off the Band Aid?

They are criticised for reinforcing troubling tropes about helpless Africans and white saviours but pop stars can alert the world's attention to neglected tragedies and injustices / **By MADDY FRY**

ONE OF the most abiding Yuletide traditions not based in Victorian myth-making is the Band Aid single "Do They Know It's Christmas?" Yet the fortieth anniversary this year is more muted, honoured by a remix rather than a reunion.

The song has had a chequered history. There were always doubts about the quality of the melody. Bob Geldof once cheerfully admitted he had co-written "one of the worst songs in history", though he couldn't resist pointing out last week that "this little pop song has kept millions of people alive". Over the years the voices lambasting the lyrics for patronising Africans have become almost deafening. And Ethiopia's Orthodox Christian heritage always made the plea in the chorus to "let them know it's Christmas time" particularly cringeworthy.

The lyrics make the unexpected demand that we "say a prayer" for those suffering from hunger, sung in the 2024 remix by Paloma Faith, Robbie Williams and the late George Michael. David Bowie recited the Lord's Prayer before performing at the Live Aid concert, and U2's Bono, whose Christian faith has never been far from the surface of the band's music, later that year worked "under the radar" with his wife Ali Hewson in one of the refugee camps in Ethiopia run by the Christian charity World Vision. The man whose fervour started it all was educated by missionaries in Dublin, who showed pupils pictures of deprived people in Africa, which might have played a role in pricking his adolescent conscience, though Geldof has always fiercely resisted the "God" part of the message.

The Churches and faith groups have had a fraught relationship with Band Aid from the start, sometimes even leading the anti-Geldof charge. Ten years ago faith leaders in west Africa expressed mixed emotions about Band Aid 30, when members old and new raised funds for the Ebola epidemic. Daniel Gobgab, head of the Christian Health Association of Nigeria, said it had sparked "all kinds of stereotypes" which tended to "overshadow the good" found on the continent. But Ghanaian academic and Presbyterian minister Kwabena Opuni-Frimpong said Africa needed people who could mobilise international resources to fight Ebola. They were offering help "not because Africans are a bunch of helpless, hopeless people, but to remind the world of our common humanity and our common responsibility".

Christian NGOs have also been torn. Early last year the head of Christian Aid, Patrick Watt, expressed relief that it would be 11 months before he would hear the "plaintive wailing" of "Do They Know It's Christmas?" In a piece for the *Daily Express* he accused Band Aid of "reinforcing deeply troubling tropes about helpless Africans and white saviours that continue to shape for the worse how people in the UK think about hunger, poverty and aid". Insisting it was time to "tear off the Band Aid", he wrote that, by promoting the idea that drought and hunger are simply part and parcel of life in east Africa, the record had bred apathy and cynicism, and undermined interest in the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region, estimated to have left more than half a million people dead.

PHOTO: ALAMY/AP



Bob Geldof, the prime mover of the Band Aid Christmas song, and Bono, one of its stars

Christian Aid were coy when I asked about Watt's outburst, saying only, "Our responsibility today is to shift more power, decision- making and money to the communities worst affected by crisis and poverty. But to do that, we must amplify the stories people want to tell rather than merely speaking on their behalf."

John Kennedy, a long-time trustee of the charity that handles funds raised by the single, and author of a new memoir titled *Just For One Hour*, admits he was staggered by Watt's article. "We've funded Christian Aid's projects for most of the last 40 years. We had just given them £500,000 and then woke up the next morning to find they were accusing us of being white saviours."

Cafod's director of advocacy and communications Neil Thorns told me the charity was grateful for funds it received from Band Aid. "In 1984 I also bought the single, and I remember a collection being taken in my church for famine relief. It was incredible how it united the world. We don't want to lose that." He observes that since "Do They Know It's Christmas?" was first released, "the sector has moved on, and a criticism of Band Aid is that it didn't always work with people on the ground. Cafod has always been collaborative as we know initiatives have to be led by local actors as they are the ones dealing with these issues 24/7."

Thorn's response reflects what Paul Gifford, emeritus professor of religion at SOAS, describes as "the increasing resentment in Africa against any implication of dependency – hence all the talk of 'partnership', and the insistence on 'sovereignty'". Kennedy insists the Band Aid Trust works with people on the ground, including faith leaders and groups. "There was a Franciscan friar in Addis Ababa called Brother Gus who was a linchpin for us in 1984," he recalls. "He was moved by the famine and was great at telling us what we needed to do." Kennedy also highlights Band Aid's support for Mary's Meals, which distributes food across Africa with local partners.

The question of how much aid and development charities can do in the face of major structural inequalities across the globe is a pressing one – as is how to engage public opinion without disempowering people in low- and middle-income countries. These are particularly thorny issues for faith groups.

While Kennedy and Thorns would like to see a time when Band Aid and development agencies such as Cafod are redundant, both believe there is still valuable work for them to do. "Band Aid raised awareness when the world was forgetting, and the world is still forgetting now," Thorns told me. "The civil war in Sudan is the world's worst humanitarian crisis but it gets so little coverage. It was good when pop singer Dua Lipa spoke out about this. She wasn't trying to say she had the solution."

When asked what faith groups bring to the table, he said: "It's in our DNA to see everyone across the world as sisters and brothers deserving of dignity and a voice. If they're in need, we can't ignore it." Cafod, Christian Aid and other agencies have always prioritised working with local partners. When state structures have broken down, faith networks are sometimes the only way aid can be delivered.

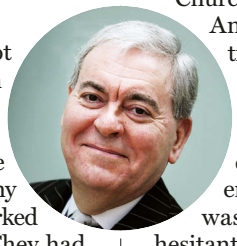
Kennedy, who was raised and educated in north London's Irish Catholic community, told me that the parable of the Good Samaritan is "in the blood, even if it doesn't motivate me every day. The idea that you cross the road instead of passing by when someone is in need is an important one."

That sense of being part of a common human family, frighteningly absent in our fragmented world, should be a lesson to take from Band Aid – in a new form, for a new generation, and a new audience.

Maddy Fry is a freelance writer and journalist.

A Church of England priest deeply embedded in the Anglo-Catholic tradition seemed set for decades of unobtrusive ministry in a provincial city. Then the Church of England decided to ordain women and his world turned upside down / **By FRANCIS BOWN**

The reluctant Catholic



AUNTIE MAUD pushed open the heavy oak door and turned to me. "In we go." Thus began my journey of faith. The Church of St Nicholas is by far the oldest in Leicester, although I suspect it had been chosen for my first ecclesiastical outing because of its proximity to a bus stop rather than its Saxon brickwork. But then came the tingle: the exquisite sense of strangeness and excitement which startled the seven-year-old boy and can still move the elderly man. First the smell – dampness, furniture polish, candle wax, but no incense, for this was broad, not high – and then the light – greys and browns and the brighter palette of the stained glass. Finally, the sense of being drawn to something important at the east end. Later, I learned to call these stirrings the sense of divine immanence.

A decade passed with the seed lying dormant, for my relatives were not churchgoers, until germination came in the unlikely guise of the Oxbridge scholarship exams. The grammar school took these seriously, and I fell into the company of a couple of fellow pupils also marked down as likely award-winners. They had found a way of relieving the boredom of provincial Sunday mornings. Would I care to join them? Soon we were confirmed, and from all the Church of England had to offer in the city centre we settled on the medieval gem of St Mary de Castro. Here was Anglo-Catholicism of the English usage: bells and smoke, the inspiring language of the Book of Common Prayer, frequent processions, Gothic chasubles and servers in apparelled amices. God was in his Heaven, and Heaven was glimpsed at the 11 a.m. Solemn Eucharist.

At Cambridge the thought of ordination stirred, for I found a saintly hero. The Revd Dr Cuthbert Keet was a published scholar on the Psalms. He was also vicar of St Clement's Church, next to Magdalen Bridge. Other Anglo-Catholic undergraduates trooped off to Little St Mary's to hear sermons from the great and the good in its packed pews. But the beguiling strangeness I sought came to me only in the near emptiness of St Clement's. Fr Keet was elderly, courteous and slightly hesitant of manner. But he was a mighty Defender of the Faith, without compromise when asserting the Catholic claims of the Church of England and the importance of the eucharistic fast from midnight. The latter meant that only the celebrant communicated at the sung Mass, the faithful receiving Holy Communion at the early celebration and returning later to make an act of spiritual communion. This discipline I found profoundly moving. It certainly deepened my prayer life during my years at Jesus College.

MY SUPERVISOR in the history of art introduced me to his friend, the newly retired Roman Catholic chaplain at the university. Mgr Alfred Gilbey was a magnetic figure, in his frock coat, shovel hat and buckle shoes. Experiencing his kindly conversation and meticulous manners, it was easy to see why he was renowned for making converts. But the chaplaincy had changed after his departure, and its enthusiasm for the post-Vatican II liturgical ways rather shocked me. I preferred the ethereal delights of Evensong at King's and St John's, in their glory days with David Willcocks and George Guest.

The selection conference having been negotiated, I headed off for the theological college and training for the priesthood. But Oxford was very nearly my downfall. Its manifold distractions and overwhelming sense of *joie de vivre* made my already modest inclination to master New Testament Greek quite disappear. I was sacked. But my fellow ordinands' espousal of everything new coming from Rome prompted one intellectual exercise: comparing Leo XIII's 1896 bull *Apostolicae Curae* and its declaration that Anglican ordinations were "absolutely null and utterly void" with the answer from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, *Saepius Officio*. It was the latter I found convincing.

My two happy years as a pedagogue ended abruptly with a telephone call from the Bishop of Leicester, the learned and wise Dr Ronald Williams. The pursuit of serious things must resume. During my year at Lincoln Theological College, the prospect of women priests began to loom as a threatening storm. At the final retreat I sought out our spiritual guide, Michael Ramsey, former Primate of



All England. Given the situation, should I withdraw? No, was his advice. But, should the ordination of women take place and I believed it to be an act of apostasy, I must then leave the Church of England.

THESE WORDS stayed with me as I knelt before the Archbishop of York to be deaconed and priested, during my curacy in the lovely market town of Howden and throughout my time as the vicar of St Stephen's, Sculcoates. Sculcoates was designated "an urban priority area". Poor and full of problems it was the right place for a keen young Anglo-Catholic who thought he might be Fr Dawbeney from Ernest Raymond's *The Chalice and the Sword*.

I did what I could with the former Methodist chapel on a main road in the centre of Hull, and was supported by a wonderful (if small) flock of devoted parishioners. In came the domed tabernacle, the exposition throne, the hanging rood, the numerous shrines and the invariable use of the English Missal. It was a conscious effort on my part to reproduce the religion that inspired me at St Clement's. I was no Fr Keet, but I could wear the Latin vestments and biretta, without which he never approached the altar of God. There were the occasional visits by notables, like Philip Larkin, and for high feasts a fine High Mass with a choir and orchestra from York was sometimes possible. All seemed set for decades of unobtrusive ministry.

Then came the blow. In 1992 I watched on television as the General Synod of the Church of England voted with two-thirds majorities in each of its three houses to admit women to the priesthood. Most of us who had joined the "anti" campaign were dumbfounded. The decisive moment came later, when the synod promulgated the canon enacting its decision. On that day I held "the funeral rites of the Church of England", complete with a coffin, outside Church House, Westminster.

I had never wanted to become a Roman Catholic. My entire outlook along with my personal and cultural loyalties were embedded in Anglicanism. But the words of Michael Ramsey would not go away. The apostasy had occurred: I had to leave the Church of England. Then in 1994 came the sign which revealed to me with absolute clarity the necessity of the Petrine office, the apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* of John Paul II, which declared: "The Church has no authority ... to confer priestly ordination on women."

Some of my clerical friends who converted were "re-ordained". I did not seek that, believing that to do so would mean denying the validity of my orders. Instead, I have found a church which offers Mass in Latin with good music and proper ceremonial. On quiet afternoons I reread the Billy Bunter books I inherited from Fr Keet and am glad that we both found the world of Greyfriars School a happy diversion from the cares of the world. And occasionally I pause to thank God for Auntie Maud, who opened that door.

Francis Bown is the former vicar of St Stephen's, Sculcoates, Hull.

PATRICK HUDSON

MPs weighed tangible pain against the hypothetical risk of abuse and coercion



WHEN Kim Leadbeater published the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, I thought it was a mendacious piece of legislation. It would, in brief, amend the law to allow adults deemed to have less than six months to live to end their own lives with medical assistance, subject to the approval of two doctors and a judge. Proper authorities challenged the weaknesses of its safeguards – the absence of meaningful procedural scrutiny, the laxity of its definitions – to which its supporters could only insist that they were "the strongest in the world". The bill, so drafted, would not do what it was meant to.

But even on the most generous, trusting reading, the text does not envisage a world better than the unhappy present, where we cannot spare medical resources or personnel to offer comprehensive palliative care, nor find sufficient judicial time to maintain the semblance of a functioning justice system. What good the bill purports to do would face the same barriers as any other initiative. Our conscience would not be eased when the dying were waiting, in hope and agony, for the NHS and courts to grant them relief.

Suppose again, though, that funding, capacity and safety really were no object – that we were the sort of utopian Oregon some campaigners imagine. Why should we make a terminally ill patient – perhaps in unimaginable pain, perhaps humiliated by incapacity – wait until the last six months of their life to choose to end it? How could a state that professes compassion enforce such a restriction? An eight-month, 12-month, two-year prognosis surely entails more suffering and shame that suicide could relieve, that it would be sadistic to require out of legal scruple.

Under such a regime, doctors would hopefully have the humanity to offer six-month prognoses where they could conscientiously recognise the demand. With time, perhaps this would expose the incoherence of the restrictions and bring about reform. Perhaps not: a society that permits abortion of Down's babies up to term isn't much bothered with coherent ethics.

There's no knowing how the land would lie in that new country, whether it would be what is glibly termed a "slippery slope". But the map shows an ethical nowhere, its boundaries arbitrary straight lines like a territory delineated by colonial powers. The reasons for going cannot justify staying there.

I THOUGHT Kim Leadbeater's bill pretended otherwise, its safeguards and restrictions designed as a façade for the deeper changes they justify. Opposition of disability and human rights groups – including some, such as Liberty, who support assisted suicide in principle – and the support of more radical campaigners suggested they saw as much behind the legislation. Parliament surely needed more time to interrogate it, lest its advocates turn around and say: if you would legalise assisted suicide with these limits, why not without?

Yet Leadbeater maintained the bill had enjoyed ample airing outside the chamber for MPs to make an informed choice. And I fear she was right. The debate at its second reading last Friday was candid, making plain the bill's logical and practical fallacy. The 330 MPs who voted it through heard, and I believe largely understood, the fears of its opponents about its inadequate protections and ethical unknowns. Indeed, their sorry promises of reform at the committee stage showed they accepted them. They weighed this imponderable fear against the all-too-knowable grief and pain of the specific people the bill might relieve.

ASSISTED SUICIDE has always been poised between the hypothetical and the tangible, albeit quite a punchy hypothetical – that people might die by assisted suicide who ought not to. Part of this depends on how any law would protect against abuse and coercion, but the real unknowable lies within the limits of any legislation: how many people who would not otherwise express a desire to die would be prompted to do so by this law? Hearts and minds are informed by what the world permits. The law has no way of distinguishing such quiet, lonely deaths that need not have been so. The numbers would simply show legislation doing its job.

This bill asked MPs the same thing as others in the past: to trade this unquantifiable risk to life against a metric of others' pain – or choice. And this parliament made the deal, no mendacity necessary.

The life of the enigmatic man who invented the radio and presented a pope with a prototype of the first mobile phone is being remembered in Rome on the 150th anniversary of his birth / **By JOANNA MOORHEAD**

Making waves



ON A SUMMER'S DAY in Italy in 1895, a gunshot rang out across a field, and the technology was born that changed the way we live today. The shot was fired by a butler called Roberto Mignani; it confirmed that a signal sent by a member of his employer's family from their country house in Pontecchio, near Lucca, had reached him successfully.

Roberto's boss was the 21-year-old Guglielmo Marconi, who had sent his signal using radio waves: he had managed to transmit it across a distance of two kilometres, despite the physical barrier of a hill – the first time it had been possible to communicate with others across a distance without telegraph cables and wires. While Marconi didn't invent radio waves, he was certainly the first person to see their potential for communication. The radio technology he was pioneering would lead to the wireless devices that revolutionised the way we keep in touch with one another – from the first radio sets to the cell phone in your pocket right now, as well as Bluetooth, TV, GPS, drones and satellites.

This year marks the 150th anniversary of Marconi's birth, and there's been an outpouring of tributes, symposia and events, culminating with an extensive exhibition now open across two sites in Rome ("Guglielmo Marconi: Seeing the Invisible", Vittoriano and Palazzo Venetia, to 25 April). It recalls his extraordinary story and its far-reaching legacy – and it focuses on two institutions that he helped create, and that continue to be front and centre of communications today: the BBC, and Vatican Radio.

Marconi was born in 1874 in Bologna, the son of an aristocratic Italian landowner and an Irish heiress whose grandfather had founded the whiskey distillers Jameson and Sons in Dublin. The fact that Marconi's heritage was linked to both Italy and Ireland explains why Britain and the Vatican were at the centre of the early twentieth-century telecommunications revolution. The first BBC broadcast, on 14 November 1922, was made from a company run by Marconi's empire, and the first Vatican Radio broadcast, on 12 February 1931, took place after Pope Pius XI commissioned Marconi to build a radio station inside the newly inaugurated Vatican City State.

He was an enigmatic figure, and the Rome exhibition offers few insights into his complex personality – save to show that Marconi was, above all, an entrepreneur, a businessman, and someone who totally believed in what he felt he was being called to achieve. At the heart of his story are some interesting elements. He had no formal education, studying neither at school nor at university. His parents, of course, were wealthy enough to afford tutors, but his education seems to have been one that allowed him to follow his passions, rather than to move through some pre-ordained programme. He discovered a love of science and physics in particular, and, despite the fact that he didn't enroll for a degree, he did attend lectures on electromagnetic waves, learning about how they could travel through space carrying energy and momentum.

His fascination with this new technology led him to carry out a series of experiments at his family's palazzo, including the one in 1895 when he proved he could send his wireless signals through the natural barrier of a hillside. It was a breakthrough moment, and the first to acknowledge this, and to make it her mission to help him to develop it, was his mother Annie, who early the following year took her son to live with her in London. Despite an early hitch at Dover, where customs officials thought his equipment was connected with espionage and destroyed it, Britain was to be the making of Marconi. He sought, and obtained, the backing of the then hugely important General Post Office, applied for a patent, and began to experiment with longer and longer range signals, eventually managing to transmit radio signals 2,100 miles across the Atlantic from Poldhu, Cornwall to Newfoundland – a crucial moment for transatlantic communications, and one many scientists had considered impossible.

BY THE END of the nineteenth century, Marconi's revolutionary work was centred on three locations – Italy, England and Ireland. One of the early beneficiaries of radio transmitters was shipping. Although he was



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Guglielmo Marconi inaugurates Vatican Radio in 1931 in the presence of Pius XI and Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII

PHOTO: ALAMY/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP

awarded the Nobel Prize in physics in 1909, it was the Titanic disaster in 1912 that brought Marconi's operations to worldwide attention. The ship's radio operator, who was employed by Marconi and not by the ship's owners, the White Star Line, had remained at his post as the vessel sank, allowing him to transmit messages that were picked up by the RMS Carpathia, which hurried to the scene and rescued survivors who might otherwise have died. Marconi, who had decided against taking up the offer of free passage on the Titanic, was praised as the hero of the hour, and gave evidence at the inquiry into the tragedy. Thereafter, having a radio on board a ship was mandatory across the world.

Marconi's attention turned to Chelmsford, Essex, where he began to transmit entertainment programmes on the radio, including songs by Dame Nellie Melba. Soon after this, the first broadcast of what would go on to become the BBC was transmitted. Like his father, Marconi married an Irish woman, Beatrice O'Brien, a daughter of the fourteenth Baron Inchiquin, with whom he had three daughters and a son. After the arrival of their children the family moved to Rome, where they became prominent members of Italian society, and Beatrice, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elena of Italy.

The marriage, though, didn't last. In order to remarry his new love, Maria Cristina Bezzi-Scali, Marconi – who had been raised Anglican – became a Catholic, and his marriage to Beatrice was declared null by the Westminster diocesan tribunal. At the time of his second wedding, Marconi was 53 and Maria Cristina was 26; their daughter Elettra, today in her nineties, has been involved in the celebrations of her father's 150th birthday over recent months. The Rome exhibition features photographs of landmark moments in Marconi's life, including one of him with Pius XI and the then Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pius XII, at the inauguration of Vatican Radio in February 1931. Later, Marconi would even create the prototype for the first mobile phone, used by the Pope when he was travelling between the Vatican and his summer palace at Castel Gandolfo.

ANOTHER PICTURE shows him at a BBC microphone. Testimony to his far-sightedness comes in the form of documents such as the one dated 14 May 1935 in which he was proposed as President of the Committee for the Development of Television, which would not get properly under way until after the Second World War.

> Marconi was a profoundly spiritual man who became closer to Catholicism as he grew older

The curator of the Rome exhibition, Lucia Borgonzoni, says Marconi was a profoundly spiritual man who became closer to Catholicism as he grew older. He once said he was happy to be a Christian: "Science is incapable of explaining life; only faith can provide the meaning of existence," he said. Like many fellow Italian Catholics Marconi collaborated with the fascist dictatorship. He joined the National Fascist Party in the early 1920s, and was appointed President of the Royal Academy of Italy by Mussolini in 1930. Documents emerged in 2002 that showed that, whether through weakness or because he actively shared Mussolini's antisemitism, Marconi had systematically blocked all Jewish candidates from becoming members of the Academy.

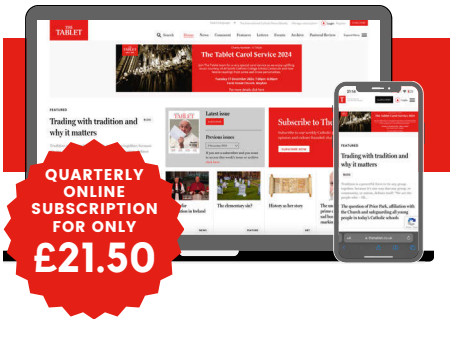
Marconi spent much of his final years at sea, aboard a grand ship called – like his daughter – Elettra, which functioned as a radio laboratory as well as his home. He turned on the lights of the Sydney Town Hall from the ship which was at the time docked in Genoa, and later switched on the lights of the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro from his home on the Via Condotti in Rome.

By the time Marconi died in 1937, many homes across Europe had radio sets – especially in the UK, where the BBC was now flourishing. The Rome exhibition includes a copy of the memo sent to all staff on 21 July of that year: "Silence is to be observed for two minutes on all wavelengths at six o'clock this afternoon as a mark of respect for the late Marchese Marconi," it says. At that moment his funeral cortège was passing through Rome; he is buried in a mausoleum at the Villa Griffone in Bologna, now a museum to his memory.

The debt later developers of telecommunications owe to Marconi has never been forgotten, and Borgonzoni says it's crucial to introduce him and his pioneering work to younger generations. Apple founder Steve Jobs once said the Italian entrepreneur had been "the roots, while we are the branches". And when he invented the portable mobile phone, Martin Cooper said it owed its existence to the original Marconi version, created all those years before so the Pope could keep in touch with his staff while travelling outside the Vatican.

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LETTERS

·THE EDITOR OF THE TABLET·

1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY letters@thetablet.co.uk

All correspondence, including email, must give a full postal address and contact telephone number. The Editor reserves the right to shorten letters.

Grown-up politics

● Perhaps Friday marks the day when Parliament grew up. Six hundred and fifty reasonably intelligent people from all over Britain, from many social backgrounds and elected recently by a country of 60 million, came together to engage their collective consciences in debating a burning, complex issue which is not reducible to a binary choice.

We heard people talking frankly, passionately and sensitively, listening to one another respectfully, using their brains collectively to tease out a way towards more detailed work on one of the major challenges we face. TV and radio talked for hours about a grown-up issue without trying to reduce it to a soundbite.

We heard the kind of debate we should have been hearing for the last five years: about Brexit, social care, climate change, the state of our prisons, immigration, the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, and why so many children in Britain are growing up in poverty.

Last Friday was a glimpse of how a democracy should work. What a state of affairs our politics and broadcasting are in when a searching, honest, well-informed debate is a rare exception rather than the rule.

JEFF WOOD
CAMBRIDGE

ICC and Netanyahu

● Your analysis of the case against Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu (Editorial, 39 November) is an interesting one. But I should have liked it to go further in examining why the ICC warrants do not extend to the mass bombings and shootings of civilians which have been reported almost daily for over a year.

Aquinas writes: "Though proceeding from a good intention, an act may be rendered unlawful if it be out of proportion to the end." You highlight the legal materiality of proportion and that there is evidently great disproportion between the number of civilian casualties and dispossessions and the number of military ones.

And I am not aware that the state of Israel has ever produced any hard evidence that civilian deaths or injuries were caused in the firm knowledge that Hamas militants were hidden behind those civilians. There have even been reports about the use of targeting processes which are entirely algorithm-generated, so that no attempt can even be made to assess the proportionality of the violence being used.

You conclude that Israeli society, being largely united behind the Israeli government and armed forces, may be so committed to collective punishment that it may not be possible to conclude that it was being carried out on Netanyahu's instructions.

But would that absolve him, as leader of the state, from not taking action to prevent such a breach of international law?

MARK O'SULLIVAN
BATH, SOMERSET

Welcome Travellers

● Thank you for the article by Annabel Miller about the Church and the Traveller community ("A rocky road for Travellers", 30 November).

When I think of Travellers I recall the post in a neighbourhood Facebook group: "Heads up everyone, there are Travellers by the park." I think of the young girls verbally abused and sworn at on their morning walk to our school, a caravan stoned on dark evenings and towed away in daylight by council workers to be left in a layby outside the town.

I remember bright, happy children, quiet and shy in class but always eager to please, and supportive, generous parents: families who came and went to an irregular cycle and never failed to enrich our community.

Hostility to Travellers is off the scale. Please, if readers come across Travellers at Mass, smile and tell them how good it is to see them. Make them welcome. As the catechist from Clifton told Annabel Miller: "This is how the Church is supposed to be."

JOHN COSGROVE
CAMBORNE, CORNWALL

Climate hope

● I occasionally support climate activists in court and was present at a remarkable

TOPIC OF THE WEEK

Assisted dying still faces hurdles

MPS HAVE VOTED in favour of the private members' assisted dying bill. This is unsurprising as opinion polls have consistently shown the majority of the public to be in favour of it.

But private members' bills do not get the same level of scrutiny and debate as government bills. The inherent flaws will become more apparent if the bill successfully goes through its various stages and passes into law.

The bill calls for three people, two doctors and a judge, to make the decision on each case. It has been suggested that the judge will do no more than rubber stamp the doctors' decision.

However, a judge is vital to ensure that there has been no pressure from relatives or other potential benefactors on the dying person. Taking this evidence will likely be time-consuming, particularly if it is to be more than just a paper exercise.

In practice, the number of decision-makers will prove problematic, given the potential numbers involved. In 2023, 9,068 people died by euthanasia or assisted suicide in the Netherlands, which is 5.4 per cent of all deaths in that country. If there is a similar uptake here, 5.4 per cent of deaths in England and Wales amounts to 31,393 (Scotland has yet to vote on assisted dying).

As of 1 April 2023, there were 3,483 court judges and 1,809 tribunal judges in England and Wales, 5,292 in all. The legal system is already severely overloaded. Health Secretary Wes Streeting has said the NHS is a broken system. It is difficult to see how it will cope with the extra load imposed on its doctors, assuming they are all willing to break their Hippocratic Oath.

ANDREW CAMPBELL
BRISTOL

THE HUSH IN the House of Commons as the result of the free vote on assisted dying was declared was poignant and spoke volumes. The debate was on life and death and, as Fr Tom Hiney clearly demonstrated in his article last week ("Confessions of a pro-lifer", 30 November), this is not the place or time to play political football.

As Christians we believe that the author and sustainer of life is God and that our journeys into death are part of this God-given life. But despite an ill wind, it feels as if the Spirit is moving. Compassion and sensitivity were not absent, and those of us working in palliative care are hoping that the Spirit will move hearts towards allowing people to live until they die and not to condemn them to an untimely or coerced end.

TINA QUINN
LYNDURST, HAMPSHIRE

LETTERS

and moving event this week. A young climate activist, as part of her closing speech, asked for a minute's silence for reflection. This was respectfully observed. Later she read out a five-minute long prayer/invocation from the Buddhist Shambala.

She also described quizzing her father about Christianity and being touched by his eventual statement that we are here to create heaven on earth. She closed by inviting the jury to join in the effort to change things in any way they feel able. It seemed like a sacred moment.

Happily, her group of defendants were unanimously found not guilty by the jury after only an hour's deliberation. When I talk about this voluntary work to young people, they are very interested and inspired. They feel my (a bit older) generation is leaving them to face possible future difficulties without being of help ("Less-developed countries stage COP29 walkout", 30 November). There is hope. Do what you can.

EILEEN REYNOLDS
LONDON SE4

Original sin

● I was sad to read (Word from the Cloisters, 30 November) that Fr Jack Mahoney recently died. Some time ago I bought his book *Christianity in Evolution* (described by one of his Jesuit colleagues as "disposing of original sin") and found it very convincing.

The traditional (Augustinian) view that we are all born with an inherited propensity to sin as a direct result of the sin of a remote ancestor – which for centuries led to heartbreak for countless parents whose new-born babies died before baptism – should long ago have been consigned to history.

My understanding of original sin is simply that, like all living things, we are instinctively inclined towards selfishness, which inevitably often results in our committing wrongful acts, whether through commission or omission. What we inherit by generation are our characteristics and attributes, not the guilt of a deed by a remote ancestor.

ALAN PAVELIN
CHISLEHURST, KENT

Prior Park patron

● In her article ("Once a Catholic school", 23 November) Bess Twiston Davies says that Prior Park College was once saved from closure by lay Catholics. In fact, *The Tablet* of 26 January 1850 reports that the College was purchased by Alexander Raphael Esq., MP for St Albans, for £30,000. He then leased it to the Catholic authorities at a relatively small rental.

Alexander Raphael, a distinguished layman who was a great supporter of Catholic education, was in 1850 made a Knight of the Order of St Sylvester by Pope Pius IX. Raphael, who was of Armenian heritage, built the Grade 2* listed St Raphael's Church in Surbiton [*The Tablet*, 30 May 1846]. His body lies in the crypt.

I am sure that he would turn in his coffin if he learned that Prior Park was no longer a Catholic school.

DAVID A. KENNEDY
SURBITON, GREATER LONDON

Naive about sex

● As a public schoolboy, I attended "muscular Christian" summer camps and what I remember most is their extreme sexual naivety ("Welby's people", 23 November). Youths and leaders alike were preoccupied with, say, whether dating couples should hold hands before marriage, fearing a slippery slope from the slightest physical contact.

This conservative evangelical ethic had the paradoxical effect of fostering both a sexually charged environment and ignorance about the nature of sexual desire. In retrospect, it is not surprising that no one thought to ask about genuinely risky and dark behaviour. A better understanding of sex must be part of any lasting change in the church.

DR MARK VERNON
PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND FORMER CHURCH OF ENGLAND PRIEST, LONDON SE5

Debt to Keswick

● Your tribute to Henry Keswick (Word from the Cloisters, 23 November) somewhat understates his support for *The Tablet*. You mention that he had a passion for supporting Catholic charitable activities. He was a very generous supporter of the Tablet Development Fund in my time as chair of the Tablet Trust and I hope that we can all remember this. May he rest in peace.

COLETTE BOWE
LONDON N1

Top people's pay

● In answer to Dr Waring's query about huge salaries for top executives (Letters, 30 November), I have had no better explanation than that I received long ago when I asked why people doing voluntary jobs in society received nothing: "Well, my dear, we have to pay the top people big salaries to attract the right candidates, but if we pay volunteers, they will do it for the wrong reasons."

I remain unconvinced that either premise stands scrutiny.

JOANNA PALLISTER
DURHAM

THE LIVING SPIRIT

AND LITURGICAL CALENDAR

In the heaven of her soul, the praise of glory has already begun the work of eternity. Her song is uninterrupted, for she is under the action of the Holy Spirit who effects everything in her (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:11); and although she is not always aware of it, for the weakness of nature does not allow her to be established in God without distractions, she always sings, she always adores, for she has, so to speak, wholly passed into praise and love in her passion for the glory of her God.

In the heaven of our soul let us be praises of glory of the Holy Trinity, praises of love of our Immaculate Mother. One day the veil will fall, we will be introduced into the eternal courts, and there we will sing in the bosom of infinite Love. And God will give us "the new name promised to the Victor" (Revelation 2:17). What will it be?

ST ELIZABETH OF THE TRINITY
FROM *THE COMPLETE WORKS VOL. ONE* (ICS PUBLICATIONS, 2014)



Christ asks for a home in your soul … where you and he, alone together, can laugh and be silent and be delighted with one another.

CARYLL HOUSELANDER
FROM *BLESSED AMONG US* BY ROBERT ELLSBERG (LITURGICAL PRESS, 2016)

Our task is to seek and find Christ in our world as it is, and not as it might be. The fact that the world is other than it might be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it and that his plan has been neither frustrated nor changed: indeed, all will be done according to his will. Our Advent is a celebration of this hope. What is uncertain is not the "coming" of Christ but our own reception of him, our own response to him, our readiness and capacity to "go forth to meet him". We must be willing to see him and acclaim him, even at the very moment when our whole life's work and all its meaning seem to collapse.

THOMAS MERTON
FROM *SEASONS OF CELEBRATION* (FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 1965)

CALENDAR

Sunday 8 December:
Second Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Monday 9 December:
The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Patron of the Diocese (Westminster)
Tuesday 10 December:
Advent Feria or Our Lady of Loreto
Wednesday 11 December:
Advent Feria or St Damasus I, Pope
Thursday 12 December:
Advent Feria or Our Lady of Guadalupe
Friday 13 December:
St Lucy, Virgin & Martyr
Saturday 14 December:
St John of the Cross, Priest & Doctor
Sunday 15 December:
Third Sunday of Advent

For the calendar for the Missal of 1962 go to **lms.org.uk**

diary@thetablet.co.uk

Spreading the word

NONE OF THE 21 new cardinals receiving a red hat in Rome today is expected to make regular use of it as a lunch box, unlike Michael Bond's famous bear, known of course for keeping a marmalade sandwich tucked inside his scuffed scarlet fedora "in case of emergencies". Paddington returned to our cinemas last month in a new adventure that brings him to Peru in search of Aunt Lucy and the family he had to leave behind following the earthquake that destroyed their marmalade-making business.

You have to be alert to spot them but three replicas of paintings belonging to Campion Hall in Oxford hang on the walls of Mrs Bird's cabin in the Home for Retired Bears. (A jolly Reverend Mother is in charge – and it's hardly a spoiler these days to reveal that the smiling nun in a British film turns out to have a dark secret.) Last year the production company had approached Professor Peter Davidson, an expert on South American art and curator of the Campion Hall collection, for advice on Peruvian soft furnishings, and their eyes lit up when they saw the paintings of *angeles arcabuceros* ("angel musketeers"), brocade-clad warrior angels, plumed and winged, armed with seventeenth-century matchlock guns. The props manager at Marmalade Films returned to present the three replica paintings as a gift to the Hall, where they are now on display.



Fr Nick Austin SJ, Master of Campion Hall, told us, "It's been fun to share our art collection in this way, and fascinating to make connections with Jesuit missionary work in South America. As Britain's favourite refugee, Paddington might feel very much at home here at Campion Hall where we are pleased to host a number of projects researching forced migration and the experiences of refugees across the world."

THE CELEBRATED wordsmith, lecturer and broadcaster David Crystal is one of the casualties of the bishops' decision to drop the Jerusalem Bible translation from the Lectionary. Thanks to one of his sons, the actor and director Ben Crystal, David has performed on the Globe stage in London in Ben's productions of *Macbeth* and *Henry V*. Back in the first days of Covid he was asked by a parish in the Isle of Man to record the Easter readings, to help save the voice of the parish priest.

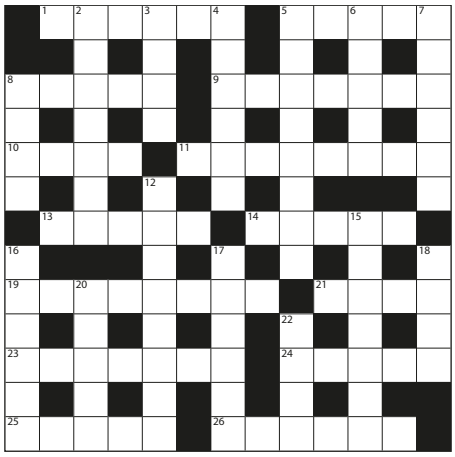
He eventually recorded the entire lectionary, and put it all up on a freely accessible website: lectionaryreadings.co.uk. A goodly number of places used it in lockdown, and it has had an interesting afterlife. Some listen to the daily readings through their headphones while cooking, jogging or walking to work.

Crystal's crisp and clear recording of the lectionary is no longer a public option in Masses in Britain, but the JB is still used in Ireland and some other parts of the English-speaking world, and it will continue to hold a beloved place in private study and reflection.

"I'm going to keep the site going," David tells us, "at least for now. I'd be sad to see the result of six months in my audio studio go down the drain."

PUZZLES

PRIZE CROSSWORD No. 932 Enigma



Across

1 World's second-largest country by total area (6)
5 Prophet, son of Beeri, eighth century BC (5)
8 Orchestra founded in Manchester in 1857 (5)
9 Also known as sea cow (7)
10 Poet Wilfred Owen said: "The poetry is in the ----" (4)
11 Fine wire ornamentally formed into delicate tracery (8)
13 Old meaning of "silly", describing buckets in "The Ancient Mariner" (5)
14 The Romans named this city Lutetia (5)
19 Epicurus was one, as was Aristippus of Cyrene (8)
21 The oldest title and rank of English nobles (4)
23 A sugar found in milk (7)
24 The ----- arch is a Gothic arch with a pointed apex (5)
25 Niklas Zennström is one of its creators (5)
26 An elongated area of low atmospheric pressure (meteorology) (6)

Down

2 In law, one representing a child is acting -- ----- (2, 5)
3 Christian name of the author of *The Story of San Michele* (4)
4 Part of the body also called the axilla (6)
5 Commander of the Carthaginians in the Second Punic War (8)
6 Type of Greek woodland god depicted as a man with a horse's ears and tail (5)
7 "The hopes and fears of all the years --- --- in thee tonight" ("O Little Town of Bethlehem") (3, 3)
8 The one good thing to come from Pandora's box (4)
12 Surname of Anne Cleeves' fictional Vera (8)
15 In the MRI scan, the letter "I" stands for this (7)
16 Large-calibre projectiles from artillery (6)
17 The ratio of an image's width to its height is called the ------ ratio (6)
18 Song for male voices in three or more parts, popular circa 1750–1830 (4)
20 Lord Mountbatten of Burma was called this by friends and family (5)
22 Name of Dorothy's dog in *The Wizard of Oz* (4)

Please send your answers to: Crossword Competition 7 December, The Tablet, 1 King Street Cloisters, Clifton Walk, London W6 0GY. Email: thetablet@thetablet.co.uk, with Crossword in the subject field. Please include your full name, telephone number and email address, and a mailing address. **Three books – on Augustine, Christianity and Thomas Aquinas – from OUP's Very Short Introduction series will go to the sender of the first correct entry drawn at random.**

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SUDOKU | Moderate

					1	4		2
	2					5		
	5	6		9	2			
		5	1				3	
		7						4
		9	8				1	
	3	4		8	6			
	7					8		
					9	2		6

Each 3x3 box, each row and each column must contain all the numbers 1 to 9.

Solution to the 16 November puzzle

2	9	3	5	8	4	7	1	6
1	8	5	2	6	7	3	4	9
4	6	7	9	1	3	8	2	5
3	1	8	6	2	5	9	7	4
5	2	4	7	9	8	1	6	3
6	7	9	3	4	1	2	5	8
7	5	1	4	3	9	6	8	2
8	3	2	1	5	6	4	9	7
9	4	6	8	7	2	5	3	1

Solution to the 16 November crossword No. 929

Across: 1 Remus; 4 Octavo; 9 Athlone; 10 Feast; 11 Trig; 12 Psalmist; 14 Lasagne; 19 Kamikaze; 20 Purr; 22 Piano; 23 Rhubarb; 24 Sesame; 25 Keats.

Down: 1 Rialto; 2 Mohair; 3 Syon; 5 Cuff Link; 6 Arabic; 7 Octets; 8 Belshazzar's; 13 Back Room; 15 Okapis; 16 Emmaus; 17 Guyana; 18 Erebus; 21 Husk.

·OUR REVIEWERS·

NICK SPENCER is senior fellow at Theos and host of the podcast Reading Our Times • **EMILY BEARN** is the children's literary critic for The Daily Telegraph

MICHAEL GLOVER is a poet and critic • **ISABEL LLOYD** lives in Sussex, with two ponds • **ANTHONY GARDNER** is an author and journalist

The structure of our souls

A controversial public intellectual dives deep into the Old Testament to explore what it has to offer a secular world

NICK SPENCER

We Who Wrestle With God: Perceptions of the Divine
JORDAN PETERSON
(ALLEN LANE, 576 PP, £30)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £27 • TEL 020 7799 4064

JORDAN PETERSON – Canadian clinical psychologist, professor, popular lecturer, best-selling author, culture warrior, friend of Elon Musk, hero for lost young men, and hate-figure for many on the left – is a phenomenon. Whether you like him or not, and it seems that few who know his work remain indifferent to him, he is undoubtedly one of the most influential public intellectuals operating today.

This is all the more remarkable given his longstanding fascination with Christianity, which looks for all the world like a sincere, if rather hard-to-pin-down, faith. His breakthrough book, *12 Rules for Life*, was peppered with biblical illustrations, mostly Old rather than New Testament, and his new tome, *We Who Struggle With God*, makes good on the implied promise there, by offering 500 pages on Creation, Eden, Cain and Abel, Noah, Babel, Abraham and Moses, with a short introduction on Elijah, and concluding chapter on Jonah. The New Testament is scattered throughout, and the author promises a follow-up volume dealing "exhaustively" with Jesus.

Peterson takes his texts very seriously. He is part of a small but growing movement that is prepared to say out loud that the Bible is the text – well, "the library of stories" – "on which the most productive, freest and most stable and peaceful societies the world has ever known are predicated". He wants to rescue it from the obscurity, incomprehension or contempt in which it is held by many secular elites, and to show a wider audience that these ancient tales might just have something penetrating and helpful to say to them.

The book is ostensibly about "perceptions of the divine" but it is really more about, and stronger on, the human condition and the light that these short, powerful stories shine on it. Babel, for example, illuminates the assumptions and arrogance of empire, the alliance of "the tyrannical spirit with the impetus toward intellectual and technical

PHOTO: ALAMY/TT NEWS AGENCY, LARS PEHRSON



A phenomenon: Jordan Peterson

self-aggrandisement", the eternal temptation "to worship technological mastery" and the fragmentation that such hubris invariably results in.

We Who Wrestle With God is not, however, a work of exegesis or theology. Indeed, it is noteworthy how little Peterson gets into the textual weeds or cites biblical commentaries. Those familiar with his work will know that it ranges, almost hyperactively, across psychology, mythology, philosophy and literature, and all are present in this offering. Thus, the story of Cain and Abel allows him to discuss themes of envy, rivalry and sacrifice not only in the text but also via "archetypal tropes in popular fiction" (*Batman*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Brothers Karamazov*) and the patterns of politics ("Karl Marx is Cain to the core").

THERE IS MUCH in here that will delight Peterson fans and infuriate critics. Some sentences, if taken out of context, are culture war gold, and Peterson is happy to use formulations – about the necessity of the sacred, the spirit of the feminine, the goal of "the Hero", etc – that are … how shall we say … not much in fashion. But for all the bracing and sweeping confidence with which he speaks, he is sensitive to the complexity of the texts and avoids blatant eisegesis, the kind of interpretation that simply reads current concerns and biases *into* the text.

Nor does he lionise the kind of rugged, self-confident individualism of which he has been accused. On the contrary, the "classical liberal emphasis on the individual", he writes, "works only when the individual … is already enmeshed … in a transcendental ethos or story that makes his or her individuality one of voluntary self-sacrificial responsibility rather than a manifestation of might or whim". He is more interested in the necessity of sacrifice within the human condition than the power of the sovereign will.

By Peterson's reckoning, humans are poised between chaos and order. We are charged, as "veritable images" of God, willing "avatar[s] of the divine Logos", to make the world habitable, welcome, stable and productive. But we are also painfully cognisant of our repeated failure to do so. Hence, the darkness of the texts he explores. The novelist Marilynne Robinson began her own recent book, *Reading Genesis*, by saying "the Bible is a theodicy, a meditation on the problem of evil", and this is Peterson's territory. His analysis draws out the pride, hubris, vengeance, estrangement, tyranny and alienation that is part of the human condition. The great strength of these "profound and unalterably memorable stories", he implies, is their refusal to look away from this heart of darkness, and their willingness, in their remarkably spare-yet-dense style, to chart a path through it.

To those who are familiar with the libraries of commentaries, theologies and imaginative recreations based on these texts, Peterson's book will be frustrating, and vaguely arrogant, the work of a solitary prophet who has taken it upon himself to explain their meaning and relevance without acknowledging the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before him. Other readers, however – which means most people today – are likely to find what he has to say challenging but rewarding, a bit like the biblical texts themselves.

For the inside track on what is happening in Rome, the UK and around the world, listen to *The Tablet* podcasts, available on Spotify and other platforms.

www.thetablet.co.uk/podcasts

THE TABLET SINCE 1840

A pilgrimage to the Northern Lights

Emily Bearn on Christmas presents for young readers

PHOTO: SARAH CHAPPEL





Helen Stephens, left, and Smelly Peggy, Jeremy Strong's Fox Goes North, below

CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING is often accused of being too politicised, with its messages about issues such as diversity and climate change at risk of killing the pleasure of reading. "Children's literature has become horribly right-on," one headline put it recently. But this year's picture books contain plenty of nostalgic titles for the less right-on child to choose from.

Fox Goes North (Scholastic, £14.99; *Tablet* price £13.49) is the lyrical final story by the much-loved Jeremy Strong, about a vixen on a pilgrimage to see the Northern Lights. "I realised the fox's journey and my journey were the same," said Strong, who completed the book shortly before his death last year. "That I was writing about my own funeral. And I was very happy about that."

Death is also present in **The Fun We Had** (Simon & Schuster, £12.99; *Tablet* price £11.69), in which Charissa Coulthard uses rhyming text to tell the story of a child reminiscing with her grandmother. "Remember our adventure, / that time we went away, / When we camped out by the blossom trees and played outside all day?" The child's innocent observations ("After we remembered, / Nana had to rest her head") hint at the impending separation, but a poignant discovery after Nana's death brings this story to an affirming close.

And for toddlers wishing to mug up on their classical ballet, Jessica Courtney-Tickle's board books **The Nutcracker** and **Swan Lake** (Frances Lincoln, £9.99 each; *Tablet* price £8.99 each) condense the stories to 14 pages ("The nutcracker is a prince. He invites Clara to his home in the Land of Sweets!") while playing music from Tchaikovsky's original score.

Jacob Weinstein, meanwhile, is best-known for his adult self-help books, offering quick fixes for everything from mood swings to personal finance. But he strikes a different tone in **What Rosa Brought** (Katherine Tegen, £12.99; *Tablet* price £11.69), a deeply affecting picture book telling the story of his Jewish family's escape from Vienna in 1939.

And for dog lovers, **Smelly Peggy** by Helen Stephens (Walker Books, £12.99; *Tablet* price £11.69) is the delightful story of a rescue dog who tests his owner's patience by rolling in revolting things. ("Now, you might wonder how it can get any worse? But then it's time for …")

For chapter book readers, **Cobweb** (HarperCollins, £14.99; *Tablet* price £13.49) is the latest historical novel by Michael Morpurgo, set in the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo. As with so much of Morpurgo's fiction, the story is told through the eyes of an animal – in this case a corgi that befriends two wounded soldiers returning from the battlefield.

And **The Last Boy** (Everything With Words, £8.99; *Tablet* price £8.09) by Eve McDonnell is an historical fantasy based on the story of George Brewster, whose death while sweeping a chimney in 1875, aged 11, prompted an overhaul of Britain's child labour laws. In McDonnell's heart-rending version, George finds himself on a magical adventure, in which his wish to be "the last climbing boy" will make him the saviour of his fellow sweeps.

Ghost Tide (Lightning Books, £9.99; *Tablet* price £8.99) is a superb debut by the former BBC journalist Jim Cockin, involving a London schoolboy who is sent to spend the Christmas holidays in East Anglia. Charlie expects to be bored. But when he finds an ancient box on the beach, he is drawn into a whirlwind adventure with errant spirits.

For slightly older readers, **Silver** by Olivia Levez (Hot Key Books, £8.99; *Tablet* price £8.09) is the story of an alien girl who descends to Earth from a spaceship. At first, she is horrified by what she finds: "Each dwelling is crammed with huddled humans. I imagine the reek of them, their pushing jostle, and shudder." But when she falls in love with a human boy, she demonstrates one of the most popular morals of children's fiction: that differences can be less insurmountable than they seem.

In poetry **Out of This World** (HarperCollins, 12.99; *Tablet* price £11.69) by Michael Rosen is a delightful new collection intended to make you "laugh, smile and think". There is plenty of comic material (one poem imagines a monster eating the alphabet), but the abiding tone is one of retrospection. In the final poem, a clock asks Rosen what it feels like to be on his own. "But I'm not," he replies. "Look where I've been / look who I've met. They're all with me / in my head."



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This Christmas also brings the usual slew of self-improvement books, offering pithy advice to younger readers. But children might do better to consult **Enduring Wisdom** (SPCK Publishing, £10.99; *Tablet* price £9.89), which contains pertinent words of inspiration from the late Queen Elizabeth II. "Many grave problems and difficulties confront us all," Her Majesty noted in 1952. "But … we must keep alive that courageous spirit of adventure that is the finest quality of youth."

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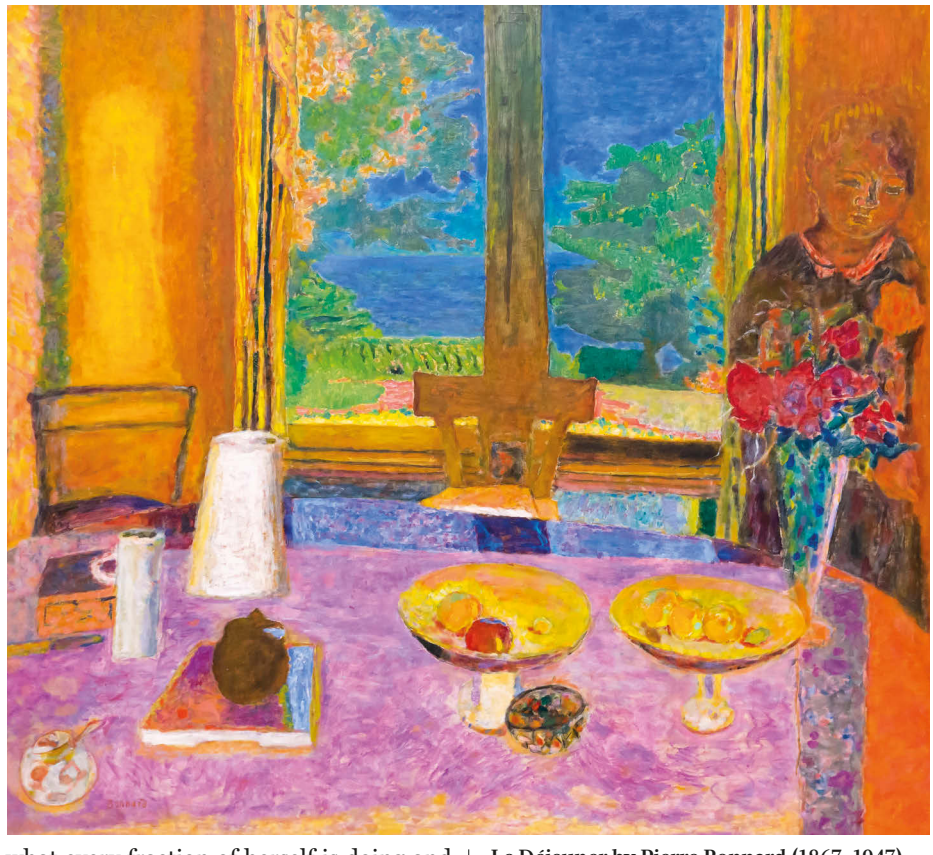
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Brushes with brilliance

Michael Glover on art books that tease, absorb, enchant

ALAMY, PETER BARRITT; GARY DOAK



Le Déjeuner by Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947); Phyllida Barlow, inset below

CALL HER A plunderer of skips if you like. Where we see rubbish, Phyllida Barlow glimpsed precious sculptural opportunities. Frances Morris, sometime director of Tate Modern, has been shadowing her for years, and her new monograph, **Phyllida Barlow: Sculpture 1963-2023** (Hauser & Wirth, £52; *Tablet* price £46.80), a title as plain-dealing and unpretentious as its subject, takes us through several decades of her projects, the making, the unmaking and the remaking, and always out of this, that and the other. The moral is: never throw anything away. Many are huge, and as threatening in their deportment as any midnight burglar. But it was a bit of a game of bluff – and part of her interrogation of the nature of materials deemed fit for sculpture – that they were often almost as light as air. A boulder in polystyrene has never yet cracked a human pate.

What can we say of Bonnard? Perhaps this, for starters: seldom has a painter transfigured the small bathroom of a surprisingly modest house on a hillside in southern France in the way that he did when he painted his wife Marthe having a soap-slathered soak or climbing out of the tub. Seldom has the erotic been caught with such delicacy, sensitivity of touch and ravishing colour-shimmer. There are all these wonderful paintings and much, much more in **Bonnard** (Prestel, £99; *Tablet* price £89.10), a lavishly slip-cased, large-format monograph of a lifetime's work written by Isabelle Cahn, chief curator of paintings at the Musée d'Orsay, that is long overdue. It is worth suffering the stinging expense too for a book of this quality.

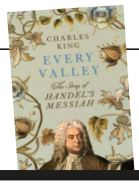
Those who find many members of the Bloomsbury group a thoroughly exasperating bunch of over-exposed mediocrities may nevertheless, and especially after a glass or two of the best, take a good deal of pleasure in **The Bloomsbury Photographs** by Maggie Humm (Yale, £30; *Tablet* price £27), a wide gathering of often rather misty and wonky monochrome snaps from the family albums kept by Virginia, Vanessa, Lytton and Dora, all at their wildly exciting games of posing and self-preening in and around the house and gardens of Charleston, and even elsewhere too. Here is Leonard Woolf (small press publisher), for example, in his canvas garden chair, jaws fierce clenched, being almost gobbled up by Pinka the dog. Another shows us a tight little garden group comprising Forster, Clive Bell, Duncan Grant and the pretty Mary Hutchinson, of whom Vanessa Bell has this to say: "Mary … a person of singularly little originating power and rather irritates me by being so self-conscious to her finger tips of what every fraction of herself is doing and looking."



Martin Gayford tends to publish books that are well worth reading, about once a year: quite a rate of productivity. The latest, **How Painting Happens (and why it matters)** (Thames & Hudson, £35; *Tablet* price £31.50) – is the work of a man who has been at the coal face for decades. Meaning what exactly? His long years as an art critic have led directly to the ability to write such a solidly well informed book as this one, in which he builds on and very ably stitches together a patchwork of conversations with painters over the years. Do painters reflect in interesting ways upon their work and how it relates to that of others? Yes, they do, this book demonstrates, but perhaps they do so all the better when being coaxed along by an excellent, incisively curious journalist such as Gayford.

Kelly Grovier is a breezily pranksterish sort of writer, and his latest book, **How Banksy Saved Art History** (Thames & Hudson, £25; *Tablet* price £22.50), sets him in the company of an artist of like-minded instincts called Banksy, who forever sends us backwards in an off-kilterish sort of way. Grovier's thesis (if that doesn't sound just a whiff high-minded for a book quite as pell-mell entertaining as this one) is that Banksy is always driving us into the company of artists who came before him in order to tease, reflect and generally have a bit of fun and games, often of the quite learned kind, at their expense. In short, he deftly capitalises the CON at the beginning of the name of an artist called Constable.

Artists so badly need their sketchbooks. They are their crucibles, their melting pots, their playgrounds. From the merest hint in a sketchbook the grandest of grand schemes can emerge. **The Artists' Sketchbook: Inside the Creative Mind** (Thames & Hudson, £40; *Tablet* price £36), ably edited by Jenny Gaschke, senior curator of paintings and drawings at the V&A, speeds us through Europe and beyond, starting with a codex from Leonardo's notebooks. He draws, he comments, quickly, in red chalk, and then overlayers in ink. He twists the paper about, writes in mirror writing. Looking at his pages is catching a creative mind in a fervour. Three centuries later we find Samuel Palmer working in a sketchbook of 1824, likely the year he met that old sage William Blake. His drawn lines are both fastidious and mystical, rather reminiscent of woodcuts or panels from a stained-glass window. This is the young man who kissed Blake's door knocker before entering his room.



RECENTLY PUBLISHED **Every Valley: The Story of Handel's Messiah** / CHARLES KING / BODLEY HEAD, £25; TABLET PRICE £22.50 / The story behind one of the greatest pieces of music ever written

Seeds of hope

ISABEL LLOYD

The Forbidden Garden of Leningrad: A True Story of Science and Sacrifice in a City Under Siege
SIMON PARKIN
(SCEPTRE, 384 PP, £25)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £22.50 • TEL 020 7799 4064

AROUND THE middle of *The Forbidden Garden of Leningrad*, a compelling, chilling and often deeply sorrowful history of the privations suffered by a group of botanists during Hitler's devastating three-year siege of their city, is a photograph taken in the summer of 1942. In it, an elderly Russian woman, head covered in a scarf, crouches smiling in what was clearly once a grand urban square, now filled with a crop of magnificent cabbages. Her hand rests on one of the vegetables, protectively – lovingly, even. No wonder: by the time this photo was taken, almost one in three of her fellow citizens had starved to death and this crop would be, literally, a life-saver. Meanwhile behind her stands Leningrad's Plant Institute: the conflicted heart of Simon Parkin's narrative, a place dedicated to growing food that had also, for the months of the previous terrible winter, refused to let starving citizens eat even a single specimen from the millions of edible seeds and tubers it stored. Why did this happen? And how?

PHOTO: ALAMY/SHAWSHOTS



Leningrad, 1942

Part of the answer is that the institute wasn't just a seed bank; it had a high purpose. Russia's history is filled with failed harvests and catastrophic famines, and by the early 1920s it had become imperative to find ways to make Soviet agriculture less disaster-prone. At the forefront of this project was the charismatic, humane and clearly delightful plant geneticist Nikolai Vavilov, founder of the institute's far-sighted breeding programme, who gathered seeds of cropping plant species from across the globe, and used them to develop new, more productive and more reliable varieties.

Stalin, however, was not a fan. Vavilov was educated and therefore untrustworthy; he had a threateningly international reputation; and, vitally, his methods were slower than those proposed by a rival (and profoundly misguided) scientist, the peasant agronomist Trofim Lysenko. Never tell a dictator something he doesn't want to hear: after years of undermining and sidelining, in August 1940 the Institute's guiding light disappeared, arrested, his friends assumed, by the NKVD.

This is where Parkin's book begins; from here it takes us, growing season by growing season, both through Vavilov's appalling persecution, imprisonment and eventual fate, and the steps taken by his remaining team – notably a dogged acolyte called Nikolai Ivanov – to protect a collection that soon the rest of the city would be desperate to eat. The lengths they went to were heroic, at times jaw-dropping: at least two curators starved to death in freezing rooms guarding grain that could have fed them; for three years the potato team planted and harvested tubers from research fields constantly shelled by the Germans. All this they did because, as Ivanov said, it was their life's work, dedicated to future generations and one they would stick to despite their malign political masters.

Those few institute staff who survived did more than just care for seeds – from the siege's first spring on, they devoted themselves to teaching fellow citizens how to grow their own food. And while Ivanov's insistence that not a single seed should be eaten raises ethical questions, his decision did indeed benefit the future: several varieties developed by the institute are widely used today, increasing yields and feeding people around the world. Parkin's story – told vividly and with close attention to detail – is not just one of personal struggle, but of how science and its landscape of provable fact can protect us. And, in turn, how much protecting the primacy of fact from the shifting, self-aggrandising demands of politics is a task worthy of all of us.

Lonely notes

ANTHONY GARDNER

That Beautiful Atlantic Waltz
MALACHY TALLACK
(CANONGATE, 240 PP, £18.99)

TABLET BOOKSHOP PRICE £17.09 • TEL 020 7799 4064

AT 62, LIFE seems to have passed Jack Paton by. Instead of the music career he hoped for, he's earned his living as a postman. Instead of fighting for the girl he loved, he allowed himself to be warned off by her father. So he sits alone in his home in Shetland, listening to country music and occasionally writing songs of his own.

One day a box containing a kitten is left on his doorstep. He never discovers who is responsible, but gradually accepts the animal as a companion. It is also a magnet for a little girl called Vailla who lives nearby, allowing him to form a tentative friendship with her and her divorced mother Sarah.

Jack's isolation stems partly from shyness and partly from a tragedy suffered when he was 20: the loss of his parents Sonny and Kathleen, whose small boat was found drifting and empty in calm weather with no clue as to what had happened to them. A parallel narrative tells the story of their lives, starting in the 1950s with Sonny's adventures as a sailor on whaling ships and following their changing fortunes as the oil boom brings prosperity to the islands.

NOVEL of the WEEK

The reader is lured on by three questions. Will Jack finally realise his talent and write the song that establishes him as a musician? Will the kitten help him find a new family in Sarah and Vailla? And how exactly did his parents vanish?

Of these strands, the first is the most developed. Malachy Tallack clearly shares his protagonist's passion for country music and interest in songwriting: handwritten lyrics punctuate the text; the relative merits of Grand Ole Opry stars are discussed; the appeal of country is closely analysed: "This was a music – a form, a genre – wholly shaped by movement ... Think of the pedal steel, for heaven's sake! No instrument was more defined by motion, by the keening of one note towards another."

Tallack writes fluently and Jack is a well-drawn, sympathetic character. The problem is that none of the storylines is quite strong enough to carry the book: reading it is like eating your way through a watermelon in the hope that the next bite will finally deliver some real flavour. The musings on songwriting are thought-provoking, but begin to feel like an essay in a music magazine. The relationship with Sarah and Vailla is promising but inconclusive. Sonny and Kathleen's lives are only sporadically interesting and the answer to their disappearance proves to be something of a rabbit from a hat. One can't help feeling that, with some good tunes added to Jack's lyrics, *That Beautiful Atlantic Waltz* would work better as a concept album.

For more features, news, analysis and comment, visit **www.thetablet.co.uk**
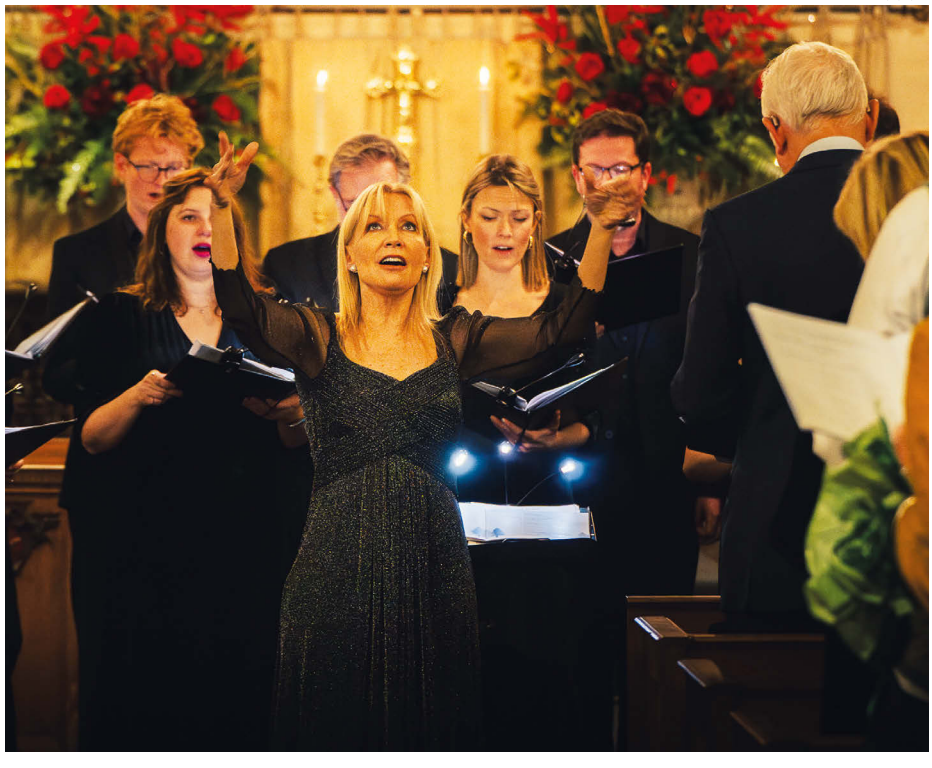
• COMING SOON •

CHRISTMAS AT THE MOVIES, Hallé Orchestra, Bridgewater Hall, Manchester (13 December) • **KYOTO**, Soho Place, London (opens 9 January) • **A REAL PAIN**, directed by Jesse Eisenberg (in cinemas 10 January) • **SERENDIPITOUS RETURN**: Lavinia Fontana's Miniature Portrait, Strawberry Hill House, London (from 25 January)

Renaissance reimagined

Reviving the great composers of history in new ways is choral wizard Suzi Digby's latest project, as she explains to **Alexandra Coghlan**

PHOTO: ORA



Ambitious, unprecedented: Suzi Digby and her ORA Singers

SUZI DIGBY gets things done – the more impossible, the better. Looking to bring choral singing back from the margins into the mainstream? She's your first call. What about staging a world premiere for 75,000 viewers at the height of a pandemic? Been there, done that. Keen to commission a choral piece? You'll have to get in line behind Digby and her ORA Singers, currently the most prolific commissioners of new choral music in the world.

Dubbed "a choral wizard", "the mother of all music" and "a force of nature" in the press, conductor and music educator Digby – whose CV includes founding the UK music education charity Voices Foundation and a stint as a judge on the BBC's *Last Choir Standing*, as well as research into choral traditions around the world – hasn't been resting on her laurels.

Her professional British chamber choir ORA has been picking up awards since its 2016 debut, this year adding a Schallplattenkritik prize (voted for by 160 German music critics and experts) for its latest recording *Sanctissima* – the group's eleventh album in just eight years. Throw in a debut at the Wigmore Hall in London last month and an ever-growing catalogue of commissions, and – with ORA's tenth anniversary now visible on the horizon – Digby and her singers are flying higher than ever.

"I'm a serial entrepreneur," she tells me. "It drives me crazy having these big ideas which I can't put back in the bottle! I'm always looking ahead, asking: what can we do that nobody else is doing? What do we need to do?"

> 'I'm a serial entrepreneur. It drives me crazy having these big ideas that I can't put back in the bottle'

We're speaking over Zoom, Digby an animated blond blur – hands restlessly conducting her speech. She's buoyantly energetic, despite having got back to her home outside Bath in the early hours; it's Christmas concert season, and rehearsals are non-stop. But an injection of energy arrived this morning in the form of a new score for ORA's December concert by film composer David Norland. "It's called *Visitation*, and it's based on the *Hodie Christus Natus* text. The music is exploratory and somehow new – he uses some of his film score techniques – beautiful and so moving. It's very special."

Norland's carol is the sixty-sixth work in ORA's ambitious, unprecedented project: commissioning 100 choral works in the choir's first 10 years, each a "reflection" of a Renaissance musical masterpiece by the likes of Byrd, Tallis, Palestrina and Victoria.

"We did a test run of the concept," Digby recalls. "There were a couple of cynics in the audience saying, 'You can't compare contemporary choral pieces with the greats; they're going to fall flat.' But by the end of the evening people were saying, 'This might actually work.' Now everyone is doing it; we're getting all sorts of musical reimaginings, and listeners are curious rather than sceptical. But we were the pioneers."

ORA'S GROWING catalogue is a who's who of choral music, a snapshot of what Digby describes as "a new Golden Age" of composition. James MacMillan, Roxanna Panufnik, Eriks Esenvalds, Jonathan Dove and Nicola LeFanu sit alongside some canny bets on the next generation: Owain Park, Dani Howard, Electra Perivolaris. There are even the first fruits from the choir's Graduate and Young Composer schemes – "intensive workshops in harmony, counterpoint, the history of choral music, how to set sacred and secular texts, as well as 10 hours of mentoring from top professional composers" – which are helping sustain choral composing as a living ecosystem against a backdrop of increasingly lean educational provision. But, says Digby, choosing the right composers is just the first step.

"There's a lot of new choral music being commissioned now. You have to be careful that you don't just get a lot of generic, Whitacre sound-alikes. It's not enough just to choose great musicians, you then want to get each composer's best work from them – to get them excited and inspired by the particular brief. It's about using the Renaissance music as a springboard.

"I tell the composers: you could take the structure from the musical original, a melodic

CONTINUED ON **PAGE 22**

CONTINUED FROM **PAGE 21**

fragment, a texture: anything that inspires you. We've had such a variety of responses. One composer just took a single chord, a really interesting one, from Thomas Weelkes and built everything around that. The result was very beautiful and complex."

Few premieres will top that of *Vidi aquam*, James MacMillan's monumental reflection on Tallis' 40-part motet *Spem in alium*. "It still bends my mind to think about it," says Digby. "In the heart of lockdown we managed to live-stream a world premiere performance from Tate Modern's Turbine Hall to 75,000 people – we even had a viewer in Antarctica! The singers hadn't worked for more than six months, we were all three metres apart (there was the distance of a football pitch between me and the furthest singer), and we couldn't rehearse in or access the venue until an hour before we went live. It was quite extraordinary."

The Reflections project has had plenty of success, from pieces "going viral" (Roderick Williams' *Ave verum corpus Re-imagined*) and entering the global choral repertoire (Roxanna Panufnik's *Kyrie after Byrd*, Esenvalds' *Infelix ego*), to raising the bar on choral technique (Julian Anderson's fiercely demanding *Magnificat*). "That's the one I'm most proud of," Digby says. "It's a towering masterpiece. Though I'm not sure it will ever be performed by anyone else – it's so difficult."

THE ANDERSON is the centrepiece of *Sanctissima* – ORA's latest release, and the group's most ambitious recording project yet. The double album weaves together a sequence of new reflections with Renaissance motets and plainchant to create a "fantasy construction of a Vespers and Benediction service in honour of the Virgin Mary". Slipping in and out of eras and styles, plainchant episodes stopping time altogether, it's a hypnotic musical ritual – an experience as far from the atomised, track-shuffle trend of listening as it would be possible to imagine. Does it matter if listeners treat it as meditation rather than strictly as liturgy?

"Vespers is a service of contemplation – a preparation for a new day," Digby says. "So while I think the sequence performs a spiritual function, it's also engaging on a purely musical and emotional level. I'm not religious, but I find when you encounter an expression of human genius which is so elevated, it becomes transfigurative; it creates a soul shift.

"'Spiritual' is a terribly inadequate word and can be misused; the only way I can express it better is to say that, in the final Alleluia of MacMillan's *Vidi aquam* for example, I see God. What I want for our audience, whether for live performances or recordings, is to feel the same thing: to be transfigured in some way."

What does that mean? "It's different for everyone," she says. "Different for someone with faith, for someone without. But that doesn't matter; our aim is the same. It's never less than that."

PHOTO: MARC BRENNER



Ncuti Gatwa as Algernon at the National

THEATRE

Gaiety unconfined

Wilde's wit perfectly pitched

MARK LAWSON

The Importance of Being Earnest
LYTTELTON, NATIONAL THEATRE, LONDON

THE POTENTIAL heights and depths of a literary career were startlingly illustrated in 1895. On 14 February, Oscar Wilde premiered *The Importance of Being Earnest* to a London reception that led a five-decade veteran of theatre in the cast to declare it the most triumphal opening ever. By 25 May, the playwright was in jail for gross indecency with men.

Theatrical rise and personal fall were linked. Wilde's detractors in society were surely riled by a drama in which two young toffs, Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, lead double lives of exceptional, and exposing, complexity. There are references to the improbability of either man marrying, husbands and wives are regularly denigrated as sexless unions of social convenience and the dialogue delights in deceit, a climactic line being: "For the first time in my life, I am forced to tell the truth!" As duality was also the theme of Wilde's hit novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), the Victorian establishment may have sensed that the writer was hiding in plain sight.

Max Webster's revival begins with Ncuti Gatwa's perky, smirking Algernon playing the piano while wearing a dress, his status as the current star of *Doctor Who* drawing an audience reaction extraordinarily raucous for the National. A prefatory transexual orgy dumb show is followed by a high camp catwalk interlude in which Algernon chooses country clothes.

These interpolated scenes may infuriate purists but, just as the dramatist Andrew Davies, in his wet-shirt TV version of *Pride and Prejudice*, released a sexual tension to which Jane Austen could only allude, it seems unlikely that Oscar Wilde's spirit would storm out of the Lyttelton Theatre in protest. The playwright was familiar with a homosexual, cross-dressing demi-monde details of which were used against him in his trial, and would probably have written about it if he could.

And, crucially, these extravagant additions are entr'actes. Apart from a few textual tweaks, including a reference to a current queer venue, the text is played straight, Wilde's gags landing perfectly 129 years on. When Algernon kills off the ailing friend whom he has used as an excuse to leave London – "The doctors found out that Bunbury could not live ... so Bunbury died" – Lady Bracknell ripostes: "He seems to have had great confidence in the opinion of his physicians." This paradoxical, epigrammatic style audibly influenced later playwrights – Noël Coward, Tom Stoppard, Alan Bennett – but the source of such talk still flows gloriously pure.

Many famous lines, though, are given fresh energy by diverse casting. Sharon D. Clarke's Lady Bracknell is an African matriarch, divided by a sash of Commonwealth medals. When Jack reveals that he was found at Victoria Station "in a handbag", Wilde provides a speech direction – "[*gravely*]" – for the actor's feed line but not for the actress's echo: "A handbag?"

This suggests the writer was unaware of having written one of the greatest theatrical punchlines, or that he trusted each performer to invent a delivery. Clarke's solution is suddenly to lose her imperious English upper-class accent, the information shattering her salon confidence. Ronke Adekoluejo's Gwendolen has similar moments when events disrupt her manner. Hugh Skinner's Jack is an extraordinary demonstration of physical comedy, skipping and loping around the stage as if his limbs resist the period's tight suits and social rules.

Acting awards seem certain but there should also be a prize for Rae Smith's sets – including a sub-tropical Hertfordshire garden threatened by a Triffidish bloom – and costumes: a floral lounge suit for Gatwa and a yellow frock for Clarke that might float a hovercraft. This version is, in every historical meaning of the word, gay to a spectacular degree.

TELEVISION

A thoroughly modern Mary

Lots of drama – but no donkeys

LUCY LETHBRIDGE

Mary
NETFLIX

PHOTO: NETFLIX



Instagrammable eyebrows: Noa Cohen as Mary

THERE HAVE BEEN calls in the usual social media circles for Netflix's new film of the life of Mary to be boycotted because the lead is played by Israeli Noa Cohen rather than a Palestinian. But Mary was a Jew from Judaea so it's hard to see, beyond the narrow lens of contemporary geopolitics, why a Jewish actor shouldn't be the entirely culturally appropriate choice. Elsewhere, the casting of Mary, directed by the Catholic D.J. Caruso, is liberally international: the angel Gabriel is played by the black British boxer Dudley O'Shaughnessy; Satan is played by Australian Eamon Farren and Herod is Anthony Hopkins.

We begin with Anne and Joachim and the miracle of the baby they longed for – and the film ends with the Presentation of Christ to old Simeon in the temple of Jerusalem. What do we know of the early life of Mary? Very little, so the film draws on (and draws out) fragments from Apocrypha, Talmudic texts and Josephus. This is an expensive production with lavish visual effects and I was hoping for a standout Nativity scene but the accounts of Luke and Matthew seem to be skimmed over here. The Magi arrive but are gone in a glimmer.

It is a traditional, even devotional film, and its all-purpose mythical/fantastical costuming and sometimes enjoyably (unwittingly so) portentous dialogue echoes old-fashioned biblical epics and fantasies such as *Game of Thrones* in which every word and action imparts meaning with a capital M. Anthony Hopkins is the only actor here who can pull this off without sounding as though he is reading flash cards. His Herod is a monster of insecurity, vanity and narcissism.

Noa Cohen has a sweet resilience about her but this thoroughly modern Mary, with her Instagrammable eyebrows, is as much a woman of our own era as the models for Raphael's Madonnas were of theirs. They've played around with ages, perhaps wary of current sensibilities: Mary enters the temple at 12 (rather than three) so we can vaguely assume she must be in her early twenties when she is betrothed to Joseph who is the same age as her. Everyone in *Mary* is beautiful and well-fed, dressed in sumptuous chiffon-y garments as if in some dream of Atlantis. Soft-lit Nazareth is a picturesque clutter of tasteful verandas where gauzy curtains flutter and bowls overflow with grapes. Aesthetic considerations have trumped the deep power of older symbols and – this I really do not understand – they have jettisoned donkeys, mules, asses. It's all horses with pounding hooves and clinking bridles in Caruso's Judaea. The flight to Egypt is undertaken in a horse and carriage. But surely, not to have the donkey is to have missed part of the point.

So there's quite a lot to get annoyed or surprised about in *Mary*. But there is also a touching and attractive earnestness about it. It knows it has something wonderful to impart but has only the thin language of twenty-first century popular entertainment in which to impart it.

MUSIC

Jazz for jazzophobes

No-risk discs for the festive playlist

BRIAN MORTON

Emily Remler
COOKIN' AT THE QUEENS: LIVE IN LAS VEGAS 1984 & 1988 (RESONANCE)
Al Jarreau
WOW! LIVE AT THE CHILDE HAROLD (RESONANCE)

THERE'S A SMALL but important subgenre of jazz albums that even people who don't have jazz collections tend to own. Something by Billie Holiday; Dave Brubeck's *Take Five;* Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* would all be obvious candidates. And then there are jazz albums that can safely be put on over Christmas even for a roomful of jazzophobes. There's been no great output of specifically seasonal jazz this year, but two brand new archive releases from the Resonance label go straight on to the pile for Christmas cooking and post-prandial nodding out.

Guitarist Emily Remler (below) died suddenly in 1990, on tour in Australia, aged only 32, an early, depressing statistic of America's opioid overuse problem. She was that rare thing, a virtuoso who felt absolutely no need to let you know she was a virtuoso. Wherever she played, club or concert hall, she managed to sound as if she was on a back porch with friends. Which is why *Cookin' at the Queens: Live in Las Vegas* is such a double delight, offering two discs of tunes that everyone likes – "Autumn Leaves", "Polka Dots and Moonbeams", "Someday My Prince Will Come", "So What" (the one off *Kind of Blue*) – played without a hint of Las Vegas showbiz, as if she and her modest group were in your front room instead of the Four Queens. The depth of the musicality will maybe only sink in later.



The same goes for Al Jarreau, a singer now underrated by jazz fans but liked and admired by those who profess no such allegiance. Every bit as much as Al Green and Aretha, Jarreau and his voice were shaped by the church. His epitaph makes reference to touching the face of God and he somehow always did when he sang, even when the material was secular and maybe even profane. Long before very serious jazz players started programming Joni, Nick Drake and Radiohead as modern "standards", Jarreau was ignoring the supposed gaps between musical genres and programming pop and rock hits done in his distinctive angelic style. On *Wow! Live at the Childe Harold*, recorded in 1976, the year he released *Glow*, Al sings James Taylor's "Fire and Rain", Leon Russell's "Rainbow in Your Eyes" and a glorious version of the undanceable "Take Five", which was actually written by Paul Desmond, rather than Dave Brubeck. Like Remler, Jarreau makes virtuosity seem as natural as breathing and brings to life the old Billie Holiday line about singing being exactly like playing a horn.

NEWS BRIEFING

THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

PHOTO: ALAMY/ZUMA, JUMA MOHAMMAD



Militias including jihadist groups launched an attack on Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, the first such rebel offensive in eight years. "After three days of attacks, the so-called opposition militias have taken over the city," reported Maronite Archbishop Joseph Tobji of Aleppo last weekend. "We do not know what will happen. It is as if the whole city is living in limbo," he said. Churches largely remained open, and there were no reports of direct attacks on targets linked to Christian communities. "We live in uncertainty," said the archbishop. He reported that the offensive came as a surprise and that "people do not know how to make ends meet and they have not stocked up".

Hope for peace

South Sudan's bishops met President Salva Kiir Mayardit on 25 November as part of a peace initiative to end civil war. "We know that the president is a man of peace and he informed us about the peace initiative," said Cardinal Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba, who led the bishops' delegation.

Bishops in **Ghana** urged Catholics not to be "swayed by divisive rhetoric or empty promises" in the presidential election on 7 December, "but seek to promote candidates who will work for the welfare of all, especially the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable". President Nana Akufo-Addo was not on the ballot, having completed two terms, but his vice-president Mahamudu Bawumia, from Akufo-Addo's New Patriotic Party, was running against 11 other candidates.

A procession for the Solemnity of Christ the King in **Nigeria** turned into a stampede in which two people died. Bishop Augustine Echema of Aba described the incident in his diocese as unprecedented. "It is with deep regret and sadness that the annual joyful celebration of our Diocesan Feast Day ended in the most tragic way," he said in a statement on 25 November. "Some of our devout and gallant Catholics, who joined the Eucharistic procession in a joyful mood, met their death due to overcrowding."

Archbishop Fulgence Muteba Mugalu of Lubumbashi celebrated a Mass for the Feast of Christ the King on 27 November despite a military ban. His archdiocese, in the south of the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, said the ban was "an illegal act". General Eddy Kapend Yrung had barred the archbishop, who is president of the Episcopal Conference of Congo, from celebrating Mass in the parish of St Sebastian in the military camp of Vangu.

Call for reforms

The **Mauritius** Council of Religion called on the incoming government in Port Louis to improve the lives of the country's population. A statement dated 25 November called for "necessary reforms to address the nation's current challenges" after the defeat of the ruling party in last month's election.

Pope Francis addressed a pastoral letter to the people of **Nicaragua** during their novena ahead of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which he prayed "will bring you the encouragement you need in difficulties, uncertainties and hardships". The letter, dated 2 November, followed intensified political repression by Daniel Ortega's regime.

Haiti's bishops issued a "cry of alarm" appealing for an end to rampant violence that has paralysed parts of the country since March. "The violence has taken a serious turn," said a letter dated 14 November written by the bishops' conference president Archbishop Max Leroy Mésidor of Port-au-Prince. The letter described Haiti as cut off from the world, with the capital's main airport closed since an attack on aircraft on 11 November by an armed gang.

Sor Juana de la Cruz, a sixteenth-century **Spanish** Franciscan who received the stigmata, has been beatified. No miracle is linked to her intercession. She has received "equipollent beatification", derived solely from evidence of heroic virtue and the long-lasting veneration to her.

Cardinal Reinhard Marx of Munich warned **Germans** against populist politicians who play on voters' fears to get elected rather than work for a better world. The cardinal said the future US president Donald Trump promised a "golden age" for America but polarised society to win votes, as did similar figures in Europe.

The Vatican began a study of "spiritual abuse", considering classing it as a crime or "delict" in **canon law**. The Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) and the Dicastery for Legislative Texts addressed the possibility on the suggestion of the Pope. According to a note last month from the DDF: "There is no delict in canon law classified by the name 'false mysticism', even though canonists occasionally use the expression in a manner that is closely tied to crimes of abuse."

Internet connection problems blighted the **Vatican**'s online presence last week. The website Vatican News, which relays Vatican events in 37 languages, lost connectivity for a long period while the Holy See's main domain vatican.va went offline for several days.

Pope Francis' weekly general audiences will include a greeting and summary in Mandarin. The Vatican said this showed the Pope's care for the **Chinese** people.

Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, the prefect of the **Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue**, died on 25 November aged 72. The Spanish prelate was a key figure in Pope Francis' "pilgrimages of fraternity" to Muslim-majority countries.

Compiled by **Patrick Hudson**, **Ellen Teague** and **Bess Twiston Davies**.



PHOTO: YOUTUBE



NEWS

·QUOTE OF THE WEEK·

“If people were to have more trust in AI systems than humans, this would be a very serious questioning of our action as pastoral agents.”

Marco Schmid, theologian at the Peterskapelle in Lucerne, on the results of an experimental ‘digital Jesus’ installation in a confessional.

LEBANON / Church leaders welcome Israel–Hezbollah ceasefire

Pizzaballa says peak of war ‘may well be behind us’

ELLEN TEAGUE and NGALA KILLIAN CHIMTOM

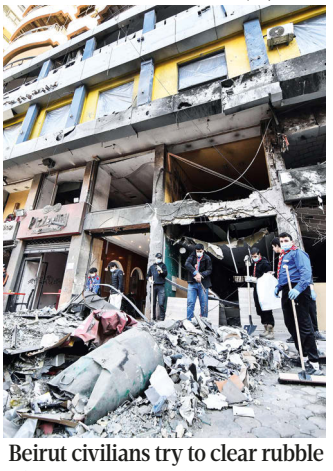
THE CEASEFIRE between Israel and Hezbollah suggests that “the peak of the war is behind us”, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem said last week.

Speaking at a briefing while visiting the UK, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa said efforts to build peace in the Holy Land would depend on new initiatives after the conflict. “We have to be ready,” he said, adding that this must be a “turning point” for relations between groups who “barely understand one another”.

Church groups welcomed the ceasefire in Lebanon, brokered by the US and France, with “profound hope” according to Bishop Abdallah Elias Zaidan of the Maronite Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon in Los Angeles, chairman of the US bishops’ Committee on International Justice and Peace.

Discussing the prospect of a wider settlement in the region, Cardinal Pizzaballa warned that both Israelis and Palestinians were “traumatised” and each has a “totally different reading of the situation” behind the violence. “No one is ready to engage,” he said, adding the Christian community should offer “something different”. “I am proud of the community of Gaza, of the parish of Gaza,” he said. “They have every right to be angry, but they are not.” In an online briefing on 27 November, the parish priest of the Holy Family Parish in Gaza, Fr Gabriel Romanelli IVE, described the “very important mission” of his community.

PHOTO: ALAMY/UPI, FADEL ITANI



Beirut civilians try to clear rubble after returning to their homes

“Tradition has it that the Holy Family travelled through Gaza to Egypt and then again on the return to Palestine, so they were here at least twice,” he said. The parish has sheltered hundreds of people since October 2023. He said there were about 500 people in the parish compound.

Sami El-Yousef, chief executive of the Latin Patriarchate, spoke alongside Fr Romanelli about the patriarchate’s humanitarian relief programme to provide the Christian community with food – including fresh fruits and vegetables – and hygiene supplies. It delivered support to more than 1,000 families in the past month.

He said the collapse of pilgrimages and tourism over the past year threatened livelihoods in the West Bank. In addition, “people can’t get permits to work in Israel and civil servants in the West Bank are not receiving their salaries.”

Theologians have warned that the use of sacred Scripture in political causes would undermine any peace in the region. “The sacred Scripture that guides billions of believers must never be manipulated to justify the subjugation of others,” said Fr Moses Iorapuu, vicar general pastoral of Makurdi Diocese in Nigeria. “We must all refrain from using the Bible to legitimise colonialism or territorial annexation,” he told *The Tablet*.

Protests in Vilnius over coalition with antisemite

RUTA TUMENAITE

LITHUANIAN citizens staged protests near the parliament in Vilnius, demanding the government exclude from its ruling coalition a politician previously convicted for antisemitic rhetoric.

After parliamentary elections in late October, the Social Democrats signed a coalition treaty on 11 November with two other parties, one a newly formed movement led by Remigijus Žemaitaitis, who lost his mandate in the previous parliament for making antisemitic remarks.

Citizens’ groups called for a spontaneous “10 Minutes of Silence” protest outside the parliament building.

“We are not contesting the election results and we are not calling for an uprising. Our assembly is dignified and peaceful,” the organisers said.

On 21 November, a second protest at the same place was attended by Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas, whom the protesters challenged for breaking promises not to form a coalition with Žemaitaitis.

The Lithuanian bishops have made no statement beyond an invocation, given by Archbishop Gintaras Grušas of Vilnius during the swearing-in of new parliamentarians, “to remain truthful, to ... respect everyone”.

Macron praises workers who restored Notre-Dame

THE RESTORED Notre-Dame de Paris is “much more welcoming”, President Emmanuel Macron said, *writes Tom Heneghan*. “You have achieved what was thought impossible,” he told a group of 2,000 workers, artists and officials involved in the project who joined him for a televised visit on 29 November.

Macron discussed the work with Philippe Jost, who led the project since the death of its former chief General Jean-Louis Georgelin last year. “The star of the day is called Notre-Dame,” reported the left-wing daily *Libération*. “The heroes of the day are the big heads and small hands who will be rightly proud of the feat they have accomplished.” It dismissed Macron’s hopes to revive, by association with the cathedral, his popularity which seemed to have foundered as his government threatened to collapse this week.

His visit anticipated the major formal liturgies marking Notre-Dame’s restoration this weekend. Security services planned to deploy several thousand police and soldiers on 7-8 December, with sharpshooters on rooftops, traffic restrictions and no shipping on the Seine, as well as the closure of shops on the Île de la Cité. Donald Trump announced on Monday that he would attend the ceremony, his first foreign visit since his election victory.

See also pages 4-5.

Santa Maria Education Fund
helping Paraguay’s poor



Gustavo is near qualifying in Electromechanical Engineering, and is one of only four in his class who have not had to repeat a year in this difficult degree.

UK registered charity no.1105031, founded by *Tablet* writer Margaret Hebblethwaite
www.santamariadefe.org

Mexico Mass adaptations 'are not a new Mayan rite'

THE MEXICAN bishops' conference denied that the Church had introduced a "Mayan rite" for Indigenous peoples, *writes Bess Twiston Davies*. A statement by Mexico's bishops' conference (CEM) last week described new Vatican-authorised accretions to the liturgy, exclusively for five Mexican Indigenous ethnic peoples, as "adaptations" of the Roman rite in Spanish. The Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Ch'ol, Tojolabal and Zoque ethnic groups of Chiapas state in southern Mexico now have licence to "rhythmically" sway to music in post-Communion thanksgiving.

The Vatican ruling also allows them a "principal" or monitor who – when prompted by the celebrant – encourages Mass-goers to pray aloud at key points in the liturgy: after the initial greeting, during the prayer of the faithful and in post-Communion thanksgiving. A woman designated by the local bishop may also use a thurifer to incense the altar, gospels, holy images, priest and congregation during Mass.

The CEM said the adaptations did not "constitute a new rite or a substantial modification of the structure of the Mass of the Roman Missal". The adaptations were the result of "a careful process of diocesan discernment" approved by the bishops. Cardinal Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel, who led conference efforts to promote the adaptations in his former Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas in Chiapas, said: "The content of the Mass is not changed but the way of expressing it."

He said that inviting a woman to incense the altar was "not a feminist demand", but responded to the customs of Indigenous communities, where "it is usually the women who incense during traditional prayers".

The CEM statement dismissed claims that the Vatican had approved a "Mayan" version of the Mass including ritual dancing, the invocation of pagan spirits or transfer of the celebration of the liturgy to a layperson.

TURKEY / Opportunity for Orthodox Christians and Catholics to mark 1,700th anniversary together

Pope may join Nicaea Council celebrations

ANDREJA BOGDANOVSKI

POPE FRANCIS affirmed his intention to attend next year's celebration marking 1,700 years since the first Council of Nicaea, in Iznik in north-west Turkey.

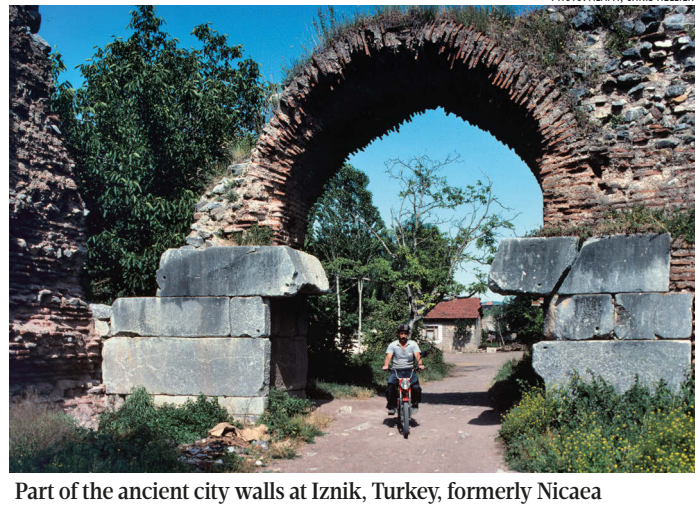
"I am thinking of going there," the Pope told participants at the Vatican's International Theological Commission last week. In a letter to Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I, he voiced his support for dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox Church occasioned by the anniversary.

"The now imminent 1,700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea will be another opportunity to bear witness to the growing communion that already exists among all who are baptised in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," he said. This would "strengthen existing bonds and encourage all Churches to offer renewed testimony in today's world". A delegation led by Cardinal Kurt Koch, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, delivered the letter to Patriarch Bartholomew on 30 November, the Feast of St Andrew, whom the patriarchate celebrates as its founder.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in AD 325, conducted under the patronage of the Emperor Constantine, is recognised by both Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

Its deliberations led to the later adoption of the Nicene Creed. It also saw debate over the possibility of a joint date for all Churches to celebrate Easter, and its anniversary comes in a year when both Eastern and Roman calendars mark Easter on 20 April.

PHOTO: ALAMY, CHRIS HELLIER



Part of the ancient city walls at Iznik, Turkey, formerly Nicaea

This has gradually given the 1,700th anniversary momentum as a significant ecumenical event to advance the possibility of a common date for Easter. During a homily on 31 March this year, when Easter Sunday fell in the Roman calendar, Bartholomew said there was "goodwill and willingness on both sides" to find a joint date. "It is a scandal to celebrate separately the unique event of the one Resurrection of the One Lord," he said.

In May, Bartholomew established a commission of Catholic and Orthodox representatives to work out the details of the possible papal visit – which would be Francis' second to Turkey.

The Tablet in Ireland

We have had several emails and calls from readers in Ireland asking where they can buy a copy of *The Tablet*. For a complete list of stockists and churches where *The Tablet* is available in Ireland visit: www.thetablet.co.uk/other/tablet-notice

THE TABLET SINCE 1840

Sako renews plea for unity

THE CHALDEAN Patriarch of Babylon Louis Raphaël I Sako has renewed his appeal for Christian unity in Iraq, *writes Patrick Hudson*.

"Words cannot describe the extent of the consequences of dividing the Church of the East," he said, in a statement published in Arabic and English last month. He said the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Eastern Church "share history, tradition, richness of heritage, beauty of art, language and liturgy" with the Chaldean Catholic Church, also citing the Assyrian Evangelical Church.

"Unity is not a return to what we were," Cardinal Sako said, "but rather the focus of what we should be."

Divisions and schism within the historic Church of the East led an element which became the Chaldean Church to enter communion with Rome between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, eventually recognised as a *sui iuris* Eastern Catholic Church.

Another element formed the Assyrian Church of the East, from which another group divided over a patriarch's decision in 1964 to move from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, becoming the Ancient Church of the East.

The Christian population of Iraq, the traditional centre of the Church of the East, stands around 200,000.

INDIA

Anglo-Indians in New Delhi vigil

SEVERAL HUNDRED members of the Anglo-Indian community held a candle-light vigil in New Delhi's Sacred Heart Cathedral on 28 November to demand reinstatement of their representation in parliament and legislative assemblies, *writes Rita Joseph*.

The Indian Constitution defines an Anglo-Indian as a person whose male progenitor is of European descent. Most of the community are Christians.

In January 2020 the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government brought an amendment to withdraw the provision originally granted in 1950 which allowed the Anglo-Indian community to nominate two members to the Indian parliament and one member to each legislative assembly in the 13 states where they have a sizeable presence.

The BJP government claimed that the 2011 census report found there were only 296 Anglo-Indians in the country.

Charles Dias, president of the Federation of Anglo-Indian Associations in India, responded that "in my family alone we have 500 members".

The chaplain for the community, Fr Nicholas Dias, said that "during the 2011 census, some 296 people got themselves enumerated but there are in fact at least 400,000 Anglo-Indians in India."

UNITED STATES

Trump recruits Catholics

PRESIDENT-ELECT Donald Trump nominated several Catholics to positions in his cabinet, names welcomed by some commentators despite the often limited role of cabinet officials in shaping White House policy, *writes Michael Sean Winters*.

Senator Marco Rubio, his nomination for Secretary of State, is a Cuban-American who was raised Catholic but now occasionally attends an Evangelical church. One of the most controversial nominations is that of Robert Kennedy Jr to serve as Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. The son of assassinated Senator Robert Kennedy, he broke with his Catholic family's politics to endorse Trump.

Kennedy has challenged mainstream medical views on issues including the efficacy of vaccination programmes.

VIEW FROM ALICANTE



Bess Twiston Davies

I WAS LATE for the funeral of my adopted Spanish *abuela* [grandmother] because I was ironing my skirt, crumpled from the two-and-a-half hour flight from London to Alicante. It was only 24 hours since María de los Ángeles – or Angelina as the whole village knew her – had died. That's the custom – give or take a day– in Spain.

When I reached the church, it was packed. Behind the back pew, I gazed at the pine-coloured coffin facing the altar. Three weeks ago, Angelina and I had sat next to each other at the 6 p.m. Mass: I in the pew, she in the aisle, in a walker. She'd been in hospital but was recovering. We walked up to take Communion arm in arm.

Later, we paused at the bakery owned by a clutch of her cousins. She insisted on buying me madeleines for my airport breakfast the next day. "One will do," I said. "Why not six?" she replied.

I expected that when I next returned to the village, we would resume the ritual that for six years has marked my Sabbath: seeing Angelina – face lit up in smiles – at Mass – before a hearty lunch, seasoned with red wine and reminiscence. I can't convey the genius of her storytelling, only say I could picture her tales of a vanished Spain where nuns laboured on maternity wards, chuckling over clinking coffee cups on their breaks, in earshot of mums-to-be.

> A shrouded shape was placed in Angelina's coffin. An oversized crucifix? 'No,' her daughter said. 'That's papá'

After the funeral, along with other mourners I walked to the cemetery. It's divided into rows of glass-doored cubicles: one per family. Inside are plaques on the back wall, each with a photograph of the deceased, their names and dates. These are Spanish tombs. When the undertakers removed the coffin lid, Angelina looked immaculate (as always) in the purple dress worn once for her grandson's First Holy Communion. Her daughter had added her necklace of pearls and the rosary she used to pray for the village dead. Her lips were painted too. One Lent, she stopped wearing her usual lipstick. "Baby," said her husband, "please give up something different next year."

He died in 2015: Antonio, she'd say, was "better than blessed bread". I watched as a long, bulky shape shrouded in a white sheet was placed in Angelina's coffin. An oversized crucifix? "No," said her daughter as the lid slid shut. "That's papá."

RECENTLY, THE Spanish bishops' conference condemned "intergenerational healing" or the ministry of "healing the family tree". The practice is promoted by priests in some dioceses, especially in retreats organised by Catholic charismatic groups. Those involved argue that mental or physical ailments can be healed by identifying and repenting of ancestral sin. They claim that, through prayer, that sinful intergenerational bond may be broken, particularly through the eucharistic liturgy.

The title of the bishops' note is "*Su misericordia se extiende de generación en generación*" ("His mercy extends from generation to generation"). Sin, they explain, is "always personal" and requires "free will": only "original sin" can pass analogously from one generation to the next; maintaining otherwise "contradicts Catholic doctrine on baptism, when all sins are forgiven". While the Old Testament affirms that the sins of the father pass down "unto the third or fourth generation" (Deuteronomy 5:9), in the New, Jesus rejects the hereditary transmission of sin.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Spain has welcomed the bishops' statement. Yet I wonder how it looks from a Protestant angle? The origin of family tree ministry – later spread by the Claretian missionary John Hampsch and Fr Robert DeGrandis, a priest of the Society of St Joseph – lies with Dr Kenneth McAll. Born in China, he returned there as an Anglican missionary before becoming a psychiatrist and GP in the UK.

His book, *Healing the Family Tree*, has been a steady bestseller, particularly among evangelicals, since it was first published in 1982. Surely praying for one's ancestors might sound dangerously like the "popish" practice of prayer for the dead?

LAST MONTH, 221 people died in Valencia during the torrential rainstorm that triggered flash flooding. While the socialist prime minister and the right-wing Valencian president quarrelled, about 50,000 ordinary Spaniards headed for the flooded villages to help.

More than €14 billion (£11.6 bn) has now been pledged for recovery by the government. There's still some way to go before normal life resumes.

Children have missed weeks of school. My parish collected school equipment for the Valencian town of Albal. A local guild named after St Charles Borromeo received it. I'm sure he would approve. He shed a fortune to succour the needy during a sixteenth-century plague, the equivalent perhaps of our climate catastrophe today.

NEWS BRIEFING

FROM BRITAIN AND IRELAND

PHOTO: ALAMY/AP, KIN CHEUNG



Jacob Rees-Mogg (pictured attending a screening of his new reality TV series) has described Britain as a "spiritual desert". He was speaking in response to comments by Boris Johnson about the Church of England. Rees-Mogg said he discovered the nation's spiritual void while "knocking on doors" as an MP. He said it was a "bit mean" of Johnson to blame the Anglican Church because the Catholic Church and the Methodists "may be" also failing to fill the national spiritual void.

Now for something new

"God knows we need something unprecedented and new in our generation, in our society, in our archdiocese," the **Archbishop of Cardiff-Menevia** Mark O'Toole said in his homily at the proclamation of the new archdiocese at St David's cathedral, Cardiff, adding: "It could be something small or particular in our own personal lives. Or could it be something big and audacious."

The Albert Gubay Charitable Foundation has awarded £92,903 to **St Barnabas Cathedral**, Nottingham, for repairs to the roof. The Grade II* listed building now needs a further £35,751 to cover the total cost of the works.

Christian peace campaigners in Britain have picked up on a **"Christians for ceasefire"** campaign of the Washington-based Franciscan Action Network, calling on churches to bring the image of "Christ in the rubble" into Christmas cribs.

Christ the King Sixth Forms principal **Shireen Razey** has been presented with her OBE by Princess Anne at a ceremony in Buckingham Palace. The award recognises her "outstanding service" to education and her dedication to social mobility, particularly for students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds.

Deputy prime minister **Angela Rayner** met Pope Francis in Rome at his General Audience last week, where he renewed his pleas for peace in Israel and Ukraine.

Thousands to walk Nativity way

More than 5,000 people are expected to follow the road to Bethlehem in the immersive theatre experience at the annual **Nativity Journey at the Wintershall Estate** in Surrey on 11-16 December. They will join shepherds in the fields, huddled around fires, and then walk with Mary, Joseph and a donkey before entering the stable to witness Jesus' birth.

Hundreds of Catholic primary schools watched **Cafod's national Advent assembly**, presented by children from St Patrick's Primary School in Cardiff. They led prayers for peace, particularly in the Middle East, and showed images of humanitarian support. Schools have been invited to order a Year of Jubilee 2025 outdoor banner to display on their gates from the start of the year, as part of their "pilgrims of hope" journey.

Bishop of Kilmore Martin Hayes, the liaison bishop for Irish prison chaplains, met the director general of the **Irish Prison Service** to outline his concerns over the repurposing of Mountjoy prison's main church. He expressed "alarm" over the creation of a new space in the church for court appearances by prisoners via video link. After the meeting he said he was reassured that there is "a long-term commitment" to the chapel in Mountjoy.

More than 200 parish representatives attended the final information meeting in the **Diocese of Cork and Ross** to discuss the next steps as the diocese moves towards a new structuring of parishes.

A 300 per cent increase in demand for the services of Foodstock, a **food bank in West Belfast**, has been described as "unprecedented" by founder, Paul Doherty. The SDLP councillor was speaking as the charity launched its annual Christmas appeal.

A **monstrance** blessed by Pope John Paul II in 2004 for the promotion of prayers for vocations has visited 12 Irish dioceses and the National Seminary in Maynooth. The visit was an initiative of Serra International, a lay apostolate for vocations within the Church and the National Vocations Office led by Fr Willie Purcell.

Compiled by **Ruth Gledhill**, **Ellen Teague**, **Bess Twiston Davies** and **Sarah Mac Donald**.

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PHOTO: ALAMY, MILO CHANDLER



PERSON IN THE NEWS

Danny Kruger, Conservative MP for East Wiltshire, in the Assisted Dying debate: "We are the people who protect the most vulnerable and yet we stand on the brink of abandoning that role."

ASSISTED DYING / Sherrington urges MPs to have wisdom to reject bill at later stage

Bill passes by 330 to 275 after passionate five-hour debate

RUTH GLEDHILL

MPS VOTED by 330 to 275 to back a change in the law to legalise assisted dying.

The new law, which must now go through a lengthy process of scrutiny and amendment in committee stage, will allow adults who are terminally ill and expected to die within six months to ask for help to end their lives. Both Houses will have to back the bill before it can become law.

In the debate, the second reading of the bill, in which MPs were given a free vote and which lasted five hours, many delivered emotional testimonies of loved ones and others they knew who endured terrible suffering at the end of life.

Equally passionate speeches by opponents failed to swing the House, prompting disappointment from faith groups and others who believe the bill is flawed.

Of Labour MPs, 234 including Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer voted in favour and 147 against, compared to 23 Conservatives who voted in favour, including former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, and 92 against, including party leader Kemi Badenoch.

Introducing the bill, Labour MP Kim Leadbeater told the story of former police officer James who waved his mum off as she embarked on her final trip, to Dignitas. She had terminal vasculitis. "James desperately wanted to accompany his mum and hold her hand during her final moments, but he knew, because of his job as a police officer, that it was just not possible."

Bishop John Sherrington, lead bishop for life issues, said: "We believe that this bill is flawed in principle and also contains particular clauses that are of concern. We ask the Catholic community to pray that Members of Parliament will have the wisdom to reject this bill at a later stage."

"In addition to being opposed to the principle of assisted suicide, we are particularly concerned with clauses in the bill that prevent doctors from properly exercising conscientious objection, provide inadequate protection to hospices and care homes that do not wish to participate in assisted suicide, and allow doctors to initiate conversations about assisted suicide. We ask that these voices be heard in the next stages of the bill to strengthen the deep concerns about this proposed legislation."

Churches are growing in surprising ways, says Theos panel

THE "FIRE of the Church" is rising in unexpected places, experts have said, *writes Tabitha Smith*.

Ecumenical think tank Theos invited five panellists to discuss the future of Christianity in the UK for its annual lecture last month. Theos director Chine McDonald said that the think tank "exists to persuade that wisdom and ancient ideas are indeed helpful and wise and beautiful".

The panel was chaired by Dr Nick Spencer, a senior fellow at Theos, and featured a diverse array of speakers. Justin Brierley, an author and broadcaster known for his podcast series *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*, began by responding to the recent Church of England scandals – including the John Smyth case – that it will do little to deter the progress of the Church.



"I do not get the sense that many people are choosing not to enter their local CofE because of those headlines. I sense that people can distinguish between what's happening at a national level from what is going on in their local parish church."

Bishop Mike Royal, the general secretary of Churches Together in England, focused on the effect of social action against institutional scandal, that "because of the work churches have done around food banks and other mercy ministries, the Church has gained a good reputation as responding to the practical needs people and communities have".

The overall consensus in the discussion was that the Church is growing in surprising ways.

Daisy Scalchi, the BBC's head of religion and ethics, revealed that more people are coming back to traditional worship programming, including *Songs of Praise*.

Mary Harrington, author of *Feminism Against Progress*, argued that the largest areas of growth were occurring in the very high or low Church. "Anybody who does the smells and bells or the clapping and hand-waving, they're both thriving, but everyone else [in the middle] is desperately embarrassed."

Latin patriarch describes Holy Land 'reality'

ELLEN TEAGUE

CARDINAL Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, said he experienced "solidarity, closeness and prayer for our reality in the Holy Land" during his four-day visit to England and Scotland last week. The 59-year-old Italian Franciscan friar has been in Jerusalem for more than three decades and has served as Latin patriarch for four years.

Preaching in Westminster Cathedral at a Mass for the First Sunday of Advent, presided over by Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, he said he wanted to let people know about the life of the Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land "in this very difficult period we are living through".

Focusing on the Advent theme of "Staying Awake", he called for alertness to see beyond destruction, "to see how the Kingdom of God, despite everything, is still growing, is still present in the 'little ones' of the Gospel".

He spoke of visiting communities "who have lost almost everything, especially in Gaza" but "they are not able to express hatred. They say, 'we are Christians; we have Jesus'."

He called for people everywhere "to help rebuild relations between Palestinians and Israelis, but also between Jews, Christians and Muslims to rebuild the trust". Knights of the Order of Malta and Holy Sepulchre were among those at the cathedral.

Roman vestments,
full set of chasuble, stole, maniple, burse and veil.
Any colours.
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SOURCE TO SUMMIT / Book for 11 to 14s due next February

Latest Key Stage 3 resource out soon

ANDY DROZDZIAK

LEADING religious education publishers are hoping new resources will help RE students in Catholic schools to engage with the Bible and bring faith "alive".

The third book of *Source to Summit*, designed for Key Stage 3, ages 11 to 14, is due to be released in February 2025. Minh Ha Duong, RE publisher at Oxford University Press, hopes that the new *Source to Summit* will help students get to grips with Scripture passages.

She told *The Tablet*: "Our CES-endorsed books for KS3 are designed to make the Religious Education Directory content accessible and inclusive for all, supporting students to engage with Scripture, and drawing on real-life case studies to help bring the Catholic faith alive."

Oxford University Press published the *Source to Summit* Year 7 student book and accompanying digital resources in 2023, as a means of supporting teachers to deliver the new directory. Author and lecturer David Wells praised the resources, saying: "The language here is accessible, the tone clear and the layout tidy."

Duong shared her hopes that the new resource will be engaging for RE students. "Our team of teacher–authors, led by series editor Andy Lewis, recognised that RE departments would need engaging, ready-to-use resources to help them implement this ambitious new curriculum in classrooms," she said.

"Our Year 7 and 8 resources have been enthusiastically received, and we're very pleased to be working towards publication of our Year 9 student book in February."

Meanwhile, Oxford University Press has also created an online course for Catholic primary schools, Source to Summit: Lighting the Path. The course has been edited by Dr Nancy Walbank, formerly senior education and policy adviser at the CES, and produced in collaboration with a writing team including theology expert Dr Margaret Carswell and a team of teachers and advisers.

Duong said: "We are working to create a resource that is both fully compliant with curriculum requirements and engaging and accessible for teachers and children alike."

Protesters disrupt Mass in Armagh

A PROTEST in support of the people in Gaza which disrupted Mass at St Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh on the First Sunday of Advent has been criticised as "upsetting" and "inappropriate", *writes Sarah Mac Donald*.

Fr Barry Matthews, administrator of the parish, which is the seat of the Primate of All Ireland, Archbishop Eamon Martin, was celebrating Mass on Sunday morning when a group holding Palestinian flags and placards with slogans such as "Silence is Violence" staged their protest just after Communion.

The protest was recorded on the church webcam. It shows members of the group, Christians 4 Palestine, silently walk with their placards and flags up the centre aisle to the altar and then back down the aisles.

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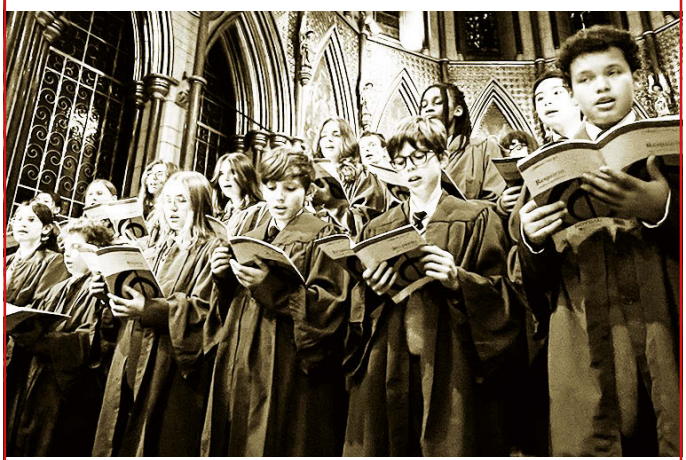
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All webinars will take place between 6.00pm and 7.00pm GMT.

To book tickets for one or all of the webinars in this series please visit: www.thetablet.co.uk/events.

How sprouts conquered the world

ROSE PRINCE

A CHRISTMAS CARD bought for my husband this year shows a plate of Brussels sprouts with a speech bubble above one announcing, "I hate you, too!" But for a much-vilified vegetable, sprouts do get about. I am in Chiang Mai for Christmas and I am told that imported sprouts will soon be on sale in the local Rimping, a supermarket chain that could be the child of a marriage of Waitrose and Fortnums.

Thais celebrate Christmas partly through a love of glittering decorations but mainly because, when it comes to festivals, the more the better. Yet while you might be able to get hold of sprouts, I am told expats struggle to collect all the ingredients needed to pull off a proper Christmas feast. Imported turkeys must be precooked – and festive cooks have more luck finding a fresh goose. Potatoes are not easy to buy but you can lay your hands on imported puddings and mince pies. For the rest, you have to improvise.

It still amazes me that the small round green vegetable most people love to despise backpacks its way around the globe every Christmas to Australia, Canada and South Africa, to Spain and Italy, even to sniffy France. Its ubiquitous presence must be consoling for those who miss being at home.

Christmas feasting is a truly international mishmash. The British adopted turkey from America, along with cranberry sauce. And much of the traditional menu relies on spices – how



I doubt any other feast equals the global elements of Christmas, though here in Chiang Mai there are limitations

can bread sauce be made without cloves and a pinch of allspice? The dried fruits that make up the best of northern Europe's Christmas puddings and pastries all derive from countries closer to the Mediterranean. When a homesick Elizabeth David was stranded on a Greek island at the beginning of the Second World War, she bartered fish caught by her boyfriend for sultanas, raisins and other candied fruits so she could recreate the pudding of her Sussex childhood. (Sadly, it was a starchy disappointment.)

Many of the other staples are also borrowed, whether it is the liquor – brandy, rum, sherry and port – or the fostered foods that are now part of the seasonal vernacular, such as Belgian chocolates or Italian panettone. I doubt any other feast equals the global elements of Christmas, though here in Chiang Mai there are limitations. Good smoked salmon is impossible to get and sugared roast ham is rare. I will turn instead to the tender roast meats of north Thailand, served with spicy tamarind "Nam Jim Jaew" sauce – they will go nicely with this sweet, umami-seasoned side.

AGAVE AND MISO ROAST SPROUTS WITH SWEET POTATOES

SERVES 6

2 medium-sized sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into 3cm cubes
1-2 tbsp vegetable oil
500g small Brussels sprouts
2 tbsp melted butter
2 tbsp agave syrup
2 tbsp white miso paste
Preheat the oven to 180C.

Put the sweet potato into a roasting pan, brush with the oil then roast for about 15 minutes until nearly tender. Trim the sprouts then boil in salted water for five minutes. Drain and add to the roasting pan. Mix together the butter, syrup and miso and pour over the vegetables. Turn to mix well then roast for 10 to 15 minutes more until the sprouts and sweet potatoes are tender and a little sticky. Serve immediately.

Glimpses of Eden

JONATHAN TULLOCH

BIN NIGHT AGAIN. Breath steaming, I wheeled the recycling out into the freezing dusk. Coming back up the garden path, a referee's whistle blew, at least that's what the sudden, loud trilling of the wren in our neighbour's garden sounded like. Pound for pound, wrens are one of the world's loudest birds, and this individual was really belting it out. I was just about to let myself back into our lovely warm house when I saw the tiny bird fly up into the old house martin nest under next door's eaves. Ensconced inside the mud cup, it continued singing.



Suddenly, a second wren darted over my head into the nest. Then a third. Intrigued, I remained on the doorstep as yet more wrens made for the sanctuary beneath the eaves. Only after I'd counted a baker's dozen did the singing cease. We're used to the idea of birds using song to beat competitors in winning a mate, or to keep a territory free of intruders, but in cold weather the winter wren's song might well be an invitation. In order to survive frosty nights, wrens must roost together and pool their body heat. Males "advertise" shared accommodation by calling as loudly as they can, and hoping as many as possible accept their offer. The record for the number of wrens roosting together is 61.

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