

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick Christmas 2013

How long does a honeymoon last? Some couples go for a week, some for a fortnight and some may go for several weeks. There was even one newspaper story earlier this year about a couple who were going to spend their honeymoon sailing round the world and take four years doing it!

What about other forms of honeymoon? It may be hard to believe now but one of the longest political 'honeymoons' in recent times was that of Tony Blair following his election in 1997. By contrast, a profession that has notoriously short 'honeymoons' is that of football manager as we've seen in the recent flurry of sackings by Premiership teams.

Two people this year who seem to have enjoyed longer honeymoon's than their predecessors are the new Archbishop of Canterbury and new Pope. Both assumed office around the same time – Francis was elected Pope on 13th March 2013 and Justin Welby was enthroned at Canterbury Cathedral just over a week later on 21st. Neither comes from the background one might expect of someone in either role – Welby with his previous experience in business and the Pope as a cardinal in South America.

Perhaps this has helped them in the public mind – people can relate to someone who's had a 'proper' job or are intrigued by an individual from somewhere unusual? Again, by contrast, both the previous office holders were theologians – a subject that can feel remote from the everyday world of most folk (even amongst churchgoers!)

But I suspect there's more to these extended honeymoons than what's happened in the past. Another important element is what's happening now. For example, the new Archbishop's tapped into the vein of the public's current financial anxieties. So, there's the way in which some in our society are only making ends meet through payday loan companies with their exorbitant interest rates and he's been urging people to make better use of credit unions who are more reasonable in their charges. He's also keenly aware of worries over energy bills and has not been afraid to enter that debate, meeting with the energy bosses to discuss his concerns about pricing in the industry.

Meanwhile, the new Pope is frequently pictured reaching out to people in need – offering a listening ear, an encouraging word and a papal blessing. The world watched entranced when the small child hung around him and wasn't shooed away whilst he was speaking; the world logged on when the Pope began Tweeting and did a double take when he was asked by journalists about gay clergy and responded: 'Who am I to judge?'

So what are we to make of all these changes?

Well, we can see various reactions in the media as people adjust and try to analyse what's happening. Is it merely window-dressing or a clever change of mood-music as some suggest? Is it just the Church catching up with where society has moved onto as others have argued?

Andreas Wittam Smith, founding editor of *The Independent* newspaper wrote last week about the challenge that the Anglican and Catholic churches face in our contemporary world. The stark question he posed was: 'Have they understood that it will soon be too late to halt the slow yet relentless decline they have experienced in this country, and on the continent of Europe for many years?' (*The Independent*, 19 Dec 2013)

I'd put the challenge in a slightly different way. It's not that religious belief is declining – rather, it's changing. We human beings don't congregate and interact in the same ways that we once did. Consequently, many different areas of life are having to adjust and we can see that in sport, politics, charities, business, shopping and much more.

Something similar is true about faith. There's still lots of it about but it shows up in different ways – in how we interact online, in our everyday habits, in our seasonal practices, in how we 'consume' religion and how we express our beliefs. For those interested in the ways in which these changes are playing out then the *Religion & Society Programme* headed up by Linda Woodhead is doing some fascinating research into all of this, which has been reported on several times this year.

But what does this mean for those of us gathered here in St Mary's at this moment, celebrating Christmas in 2013? Are we just statistics that illustrate the changing nature of belief in our society or are we something more?

The previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, would often say the task of the Church was to find out what God was doing in the world and join in. And it seems to me that's precisely what the present Archbishop and Pope are doing.

God's not only to be discovered in a group of people hunkered down in beautiful old buildings doing what they've always done. That's not the nature of the God revealed by the Christ-child of Bethlehem; that's not the risk-taking God who became incarnate in Jesus; that's not the God who reaches out to us at Christmas and says 'I'm with you wherever you are and wherever you go.'

Those of us gathered here tonight are more than statistics about the changing nature of faith – we're part of that change and part of the change of Christmas.

Archbishops, Popes and even God can, at times, appear remote and distant – despite the smiles on the faces of Justin Welby and Pope Francis.

The simple message of Christmas in Christ being born of Mary is that God is with *us*. God is present in our world and (like the shepherds and the magi) our task is to find out what God's doing and join in.

The Revd Vaughan S Roberts

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