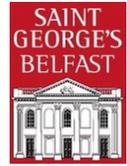


# The Parish Church of Saint George

## PARISH MAGAZINE

*An open door in the heart of the City*



**DECEMBER 2020**

## From the Rector's Desk



Dear Friends in Christ,

As I write this, the N.I. Executive has just announced a two week lockdown period which will run from Friday 27<sup>th</sup> November to Friday 11<sup>th</sup> December. These new restrictions will affect churches and mean that we cannot hold services of public worship in St George's on Wednesdays and Sundays. Therefore, there will be no public worship on Wednesdays 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> December and no Sunday public services on 29<sup>th</sup> November or 6<sup>th</sup> December. We will transfer the Advent Carol Service scheduled for 29<sup>th</sup> November at 5.00pm to Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December at 5.00pm and consequently there will be no public service at 11.00am on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Those of you who have indicated that you wished to attend the Advent Carol Service on 29<sup>th</sup> November will instead be able to come on 13<sup>th</sup> December.

Due to the expected numbers who would wish to attend the Advent Carol Service (now on 13<sup>th</sup> December), the Christmas Carol Service (11.00am on 20<sup>th</sup> December) and the Midnight Mass (11.00pm on 24<sup>th</sup> December), it is strictly necessary that all who want to attend these services fill in an application form available in St George's. This is because we can only accommodate about 75 people in the nave of the building and maintain adequate social distancing. This is substantially less than half of the number who would attend in a normal year. While we cannot guarantee that all who apply will be able to attend all three services, but we will endeavour to ensure that everyone can attend at least one of the three services. I am sure that you will understand the constraints under which we are obliged to operate in these difficult times. We will continue to broadcast worship on Facebook during the lockdown.

Advent is a time of expectation and hope, a season of anticipation. With the recent good news about a Covid-19 vaccine, we can perhaps see some light at the end of a dark tunnel, some substance to our Advent longing. Vaccines will probably not be publicly available until well into 2021, so please follow all the guidelines and precautions in the meantime. God willing I will be able to see as many of you as possible at some stage in St George's over the coming weeks.

Every blessing and a very happy and holy Christmas to you all.

Yours sincerely in Christ

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brian Stewart". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

## **PARISH NEWS**

### **Storehouse News/Christmas Appeal 2020**

Firstly, a massive thank you to everyone who has donated money towards weekly food parcels for those in need in our city. Storehouse are extremely grateful for your continued support.

During the first lockdown Storehouse provided around 2000 food parcels to families in need; these were mostly delivered directly to families by volunteers. Also, during the first lockdown Storehouse were part of a multi-agency group set up by the government. The van team collected 160 ready made food boxes from the Ulster hall, which were then delivered to asylum seeker and refugee families by the Storehouse volunteers.

The weekly food donations are going well. However, with the current situation, they are much busier than normal. Consequently, your money donations in lieu of food items are greatly appreciated as they can purchase the necessary food in bulk.

Many of you will have read the Christmas Hamper/Turkey Appeal on the Sunday Service Sheet. A huge thank you to all who have already donated money towards this. Please put your donation in an envelope clearly marked Storehouse Christmas Hamper/Turkey Appeal. They expect to be even busier this year so are planning to increase the number of hampers by at least 50.

Due to the Covid 19 restrictions, Storehouse have had to temporarily put on hold the many work projects and activities which they run from their North Street Centre. However, they are delighted that the clothes and furniture section has been able to open again, albeit with Covid 19 restrictions in place. They now run an appointment system for viewing and selecting these items.

Thank you for your continued support.

Wishing you all a peaceful Christmas and a Happy New Year.

B.Flynn

# Christmas and New Year At St George's

<b>3rd Sunday of Advent</b> 13th December	5:00pm	Advent Carol Service
<b>4th Sunday of Advent</b> 20th December	11:00am	Nine Lessons & Carols + Holy Communion
<b>Christmas Eve</b> 24th December	11:00pm	Midnight Festival Eucharist
<b>Christmas Day</b> 25th December	11:00am	Choral Festival Eucharist (Pre-recorded on Face Book)
<b>Saint John the Evangelist</b> 27th December	11.00am	Eucharist
<b>Mid-week Service</b> 30th December	10:30am	Eucharist
<b>The 2nd Sunday of Christmas</b> 3rd January	11:00am	Eucharist
<b>The Epiphany of Our Lord</b> 6th January	10.30am	Eucharist
<b>1st Sunday after The Epiphany</b>	11.00am	Epiphany Carol Service + Holy Communion

*Merry Christmas*



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## ANGELS - by William Odling-Smee

At Christmas we hear about angels and in our worship we are constantly referring to them. We say in the Eucharist, 'Therefore with



angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.' And Jesus refers to them frequently. So what are we to think about them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The Greek word *angelos* means a messenger and angels have always been understood as a messenger from God. They appear in this guise in almost all the books of the Old Testament and Jesus himself sanctioned the popular belief: "In the resurrection men and women do not marry; they are like the angels in heaven." (Matthew 22: 30)

In his Gospel Matthew suggests that at the Second Coming angels will accompany Jesus. In

Revelation the role of angels is paramount: their worship in heaven is the prototype of the worship of the Church and their ministry at the end of the world is the visionary development of the teaching of Jesus. In the early Church, during the controversies as to who Jesus was, Jesus was sometimes depicted as a superior angel and the Early Church Fathers accepted the idea that angels were part of heaven and brought messages from God.

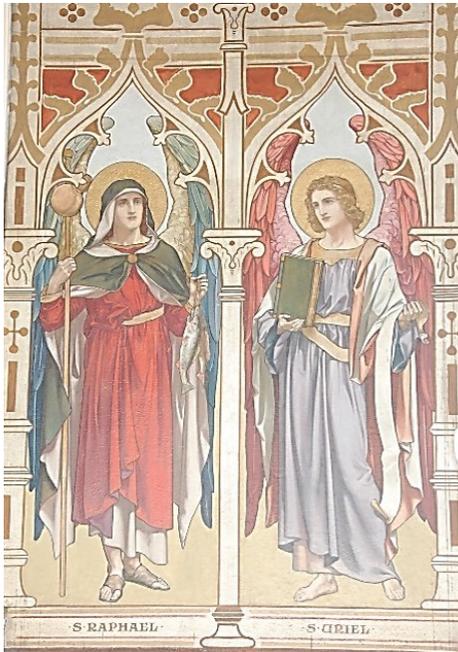
An archangel is the chief among the angels and traditionally there have been four archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. They are depicted in the paintings on each side of the East window above the altar in St George's. The four Evangelists are in the top row and the Archangels in the lower row.

Michael is mentioned four times in the Scriptures. He is mentioned twice in the book of Daniel and is represented as the protector of the

Chosen People. He appears in Jude as disputing with the devil over the body of Moses and he appears in Revelation as fighting with the devil.

In the early Church he was regarded as the protector of the Church and in the Middle Ages this doctrine took hold and became an important feast, Michaelmas, which we still keep on September 29<sup>th</sup>.

Gabriel is mentioned several times in the book of Daniel where he helps Daniel to understand his visions. But he is best known as the announcer of the birth of Jesus to Mary. He also tells Zachariah of the birth of John the Baptist. In Jewish theology he is regarded as the messenger of divine comfort and is accorded the second place in the hierarchy of angels after Michael.



Raphael is mentioned in the

apocryphal books of Tobit and 1 Enoch. In the latter he is said to have healed the earth when it was defiled by sin and so is associated with healing. The hospital in Giddalur in the Diocese of Nandyal was called St Raphael's Hospital.

We know little about Uriel. He is mentioned in the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch and is said to have charge of Tartatis.

There are said to be seven archangels that stand about the throne of God, but we only have the names of these four and it is these four that are depicted in the Chancel.

What relevance have angels for us today? They are ubiquitous in popular culture and many people talk about their guardian angel. And at Christmas time they are used commercially to develop a cosy protective atmosphere which might encourage people to buy, and they are used in popular song and in much art. But I do not think that they are still regarded as messengers of God. And I think that most Christians think that they are a nice idea but that God has other and better ways of communicating with us.

## THE COLOURS OF CHRISTMAS

by Paul McLaughlin



I found a smoker's set of chocolate pipes, cigars and cigarettes in my stocking every Christmas morning until I was 12 years old. So, I suppose, at that age, deciding which presents to buy my parents was not difficult. It would, of course, be chocolate **and** cigarettes.

The sign-writer must have taken great care, patience and skill to paint 'The Tuck Shop' scroll across the frontage of one of the retail units in the Bullring and it soon became a Mecca for all the children of the district, but we knew it only as the *Sweetie Shop*. With the shop word pronounced 'shap' in true Belfast fashion. And that's how it remains in my memory after more than 60 years.

I rarely visited it more than once a week. Friday tea times always for the comics that first gave me my love of reading because money for luxuries like sweets was always in short supply. My mother insisted that they were bad for our teeth, but at every opportunity, we chomped on tungsten-hard Highland toffee and jaw breaking caramels that would have frightened the life out of any self-respecting dentist. We had a simple philosophy back then, the harder the sweet, the longer it lasted.

The Eagle, the Victor, the Hotspur and the Valiant comics with their weekly fare of war, sport, history and adventure were kept neatly in racks behind the Sweetie Shop counter out-of-reach of larcenous little and not so little hands. The very sound of their names as I asked for them, filled me with excitement. They told stories of bravery, bravado, loyalty, determination to succeed and a healthy respect for the underdog, but this diet of 'British propaganda' appalled the Christian Brothers who wanted us to read their own magazine, the *Our Boys*.

I read both, took a little bit from each I hope, but still remember our English teacher, Brother Mallon's look of disbelief and then distaste at my use of the word 'Blighty' in a composition.

"Never heard of it", he said first of all. When I explained that it was the name that servicemen used for home during the Second World War and was in the Victor nearly every week, his disgust only increased.

"Never use it again", he barked. "It's gibberish." A red line was drawn through the offending word which was replaced by his handwritten '*Ireland*'. Brother Mallon didn't sound like a Victor man to me even then.

Two rows of chocolate boxes dominated the backdrop to the Sweetie Shop. Lid covers ranged from vases of vividly coloured flowers posed like still life paintings through rose-ringed thatched cottages with

picket fences to red coated soldiers and their ladies. My favourite was the purple Cadbury van parked outside a country corner shop that really looked like it sold Tuck. I could almost taste it.

De Luxe was a word I first heard used by Brother Maher who, despite the ravages of Malaria contracted on the Foreign Missions, tried his best to teach us French in our first year at the big school.

“It means expensive, of high quality, luxury”, he said to a sea of mostly disinterested faces. The last period of a Friday afternoon, peppered with yawns, fidgeting and most books already stuffed haphazardly into ex-army surplus schoolbags, was no time for learning, but the phrase seemed strangely familiar.

When I got home after four o’clock, I realised why. My Dad’s cigarettes were sitting on the coffee table. A navy coloured packet of Gallaher’s Medium, known to everyone as ‘Blues’, that boasted the banner slogan ‘De Luxe’.

Pop had smoked these for years, producing cumulonimbus clouds of blue smoke with a cigarette wedged between his lips as he struggled with the broadsheet evening newspaper. The one he described as tomorrow’s chip paper.

The Christmas Club card from the Sweetie Shop was a three-inch square, leaf green fold over piece of cartridge paper, lined on three sides like an accounts sheet with space for dates and amounts deposited. I got mine in the first week in September, I was number 46, and over the weeks saved like a miser. Sixpences, thruppences and even big brown pennies were added to it over the weeks.

My Dad had increased our pocket money to two shillings a week and with the help of my younger brother, better known to all as Our Kid, we managed to hoard 15 shillings by Friday 24<sup>th</sup> December.

Enough for 50 Gallaher’s Medium in a beautiful presentation box with a lifting lid and inset with all the luxury of tissue and silvered paper and a one-pound box of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk chocolates. The one with the little Morris van on the front.

My brother and I discovered something very special that Christmas morning as we dressed for early morning Mass at St John’s. Cadbury’s purple and Gallaher’s blue were the Christmas colours that brought tears of joy to our parent’s eyes.



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## WHEN ALL THY MERCIES - A HYMN IN GRATITUDE

by Billy Adair

For many, life takes some devious turns. GF Handle was to be a doctor, like his father, but he turned to music and has thrilled us ever since with such works as 'Messiah'. I knew a Professor of Law who switched to medicine and became the deputy officer for the health of the nation. Also I was very close to a little girl whose sole ambition in life was to become a vet; she ended up teaching!

Something similar was experienced by Joseph Addison (1672-1719) who intended to follow his clerical father into the Church but ended up a writer and a politician. Truly, God works in a mysterious way. By the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Addison had reached high office in the affairs of State and had become a distinguished man of letters, with a close association with the '*Spectator*'. He regularly contributed essays and poems to that journal, which brings us to the origin of our hymn.

In the *Spectator* for 9<sup>th</sup> August 1712, there appeared an article on 'Gratitude' from Joseph Addison, in which he wrote:

*"There is not a more pleasing attitude of the mind than gratitude. If gratitude is due from man to man, how much more from man to his Maker. Every blessing we enjoy is the gift of Him who is the great Author of good, and Father of mercies."*

Following the essay was a poem of thirteen verses, expressing gratitude to God for all the blessings of this life at every stage. Remember, this was written as a poem, but when used in church as a hymn, its thirteen verses became a problem; so it had to be shortened and some verses omitted. Unfortunately, this ruined Addison's scheme of mentioning every period through life – nevertheless a substantial hymn remains.

1. When all thy mercies O my God,  
My rising soul surveys,  
Transported with the view, I'm lost  
In wonder, love, and praise.

This was intended as an introduction, and 'all thy mercies' strikes the keynote of the entire poem. It is interesting to note that years later, Charles Wesley 'borrowed' the phrase "lost in wonder, love, and praise," and used it to conclude his hymn 'Love divine, all loves excelling'. 'Its never lost what a friend gets', and we stand as tall as the angels when we kneel to help a friend.

2. When worn with sickness, oft hast thou  
With health restored my face;  
And when in sin and sorrows sunk,

Revived my soul with grace.

Illness is one of life's hazards – you cannot buy health, and after sickness the restoration to health is a cause of thanks and gratitude. God always treats with mercy a sin-sick soul, for "There is a balm in Gilead".

3. Ten thousand thousand precious gifts  
My daily thanks employ;  
Nor is the least a cheerful heart,  
That tastes those gifts with joy.

The daily gifts of God are beyond our reckoning – the nearest Addison could get is 'ten thousand thousand' - one of the most important responses is a cheerful and a grateful heart.

4. Through every period of my life  
Thy goodness I'll pursue;  
And after death in distant worlds,  
The glorious theme renew

As I said at the beginning, the theme of gratitude which Addison wished to convey covered 'every period of my life' and is the key phrase in the hymn. It will even continue after death, in the nearer presence of God.

5. When nature fails, and day and night  
Divide thy works no more,  
My ever grateful heart, O Lord,  
Thy mercy shall adore

What Addison is saying here is that when health fails and the call from God comes, the ever grateful heart will be lifted up to God in praise and adoration for all his mercies, through every stage of life.

6. Through all eternity, to thee  
A joyful song I'll raise;  
For O eternity's too short  
To utter all thy praise!

This verse draws everything together – it begins before our birth and ends beyond our death. In life and death, in youth and in old age, in sickness and in health, in prosperity and adversity, in this world and the next, we must never cease to sing a joyful song in gratitude for all God's goodness.

A splendid finish to a splendid hymn by a layman, who might well have been a clergyman!

P.S. And when on the subject, I ought to be grateful to the person who manages to decipher my scribble; sincere grateful thanks.

## **SINGING DURING COVID** by David Falconer

Where to begin?

Those of us invested in the choral heritage of the Anglican and European sacred music traditions have watched in dismay as cathedrals across England have had to compromise their choirs. The effect of these closures, of contracts un-renewed, of scholarships no longer available, heralds the beginning of a crisis in this tradition. Funding streams have dried up; the reorganising of the English dioceses was leading to an inevitable demise in the number of cathedral choirs, but Covid 19 has greatly accelerated this process. Sheffield and Westminster cathedrals have both been threatened with closure, and Sheffield will no longer continue its tradition.

In these circumstances we need to examine our attitudes to sacred music, to its place in the liturgy and its validity as a form of worship. Is a choir worshipping on behalf of a congregation still relevant?

Sacred music is an all-encompassing term, a category which includes any music conceived with God in mind. Within the Roman Catholic and many Protestant traditions, music has had a long history as part of the liturgy. Each week, we sing the Ordinaries: settings of the Mass, Gospel responses, Sursum Corda, although always by a different composer. The Propers are particular to any given day, the anthem or motet is linked with the readings, psalms and sermon. Composers of sacred music wear their souls on their sleeves, using hard learnt compositional techniques, prayerful intentions and creative endeavour to create music which is extraordinary.

Extra-ordinary.

This music removes us from our daily humdrum and transforms our space into the prayerful states described in the Cloud of Unknowing. This is not just the case for the congregation. Although the singers are immersed in the physical and mental nature of a choral work, when a choir finishes the last note of 'O Magnum Mysterium', the palpable return to normality is a reminder to them that they too have been part of extra-ordinary.

Within the broader Church of Ireland, there are many musical traditions, from popular song styles led by Praise bands with congregations joining in choruses, to choirs which sing canticles, psalms, chants and the occasional anthem. Each congregation has placed a different value on its music, on its church musicians, and the result is the diverse tradition of music within the Church of Ireland.

In Covid-19, Congregational singing has been discouraged, although permissible when sung gently behind a mask. How has this lack of participation affected the integrity of the worship? Does this make going to church a lesser experience? Has the effect of Covid-19 restrictions been to

ask us to consider if music has become too much of a centre-piece and less of a symbiosis with liturgical texts?

Since the start of the outbreak, choirs were considered dangerous; singing, as a physical activity, was condemned. There were stories of two choirs, one in the Netherlands and one in the USA, where members had died from Covid. Singing was blamed. Various universities and research hospitals set about developing ways of measuring the aerosol spread from singers and orchestral instruments. At one point, trombones were required to have 10 meters clearance before being considered safe, and the flute is still considered the most risky instrument in terms of its aerosol spread. (A good thing that in Northern Ireland, most flute playing is undertaken outdoors.)

What has been clear from the outset is that we didn't know enough about aerosol spread- the amount of Covid contaminated aerosol which would need to be inhaled to cause a transmission.

Churches in Ireland have been allowed to sing since early June. However, at this stage we knew little about the distances necessary between singers and the other precautions that we might need to take. A study led by laryngologist, Declan Costello (a former choral scholar in St John's, Cambridge), with The University of Bristol and Imperial College London, in conjunction with the English Public Health Agency, resulted in the 'Perform' report, which was published in August 2020. The report concluded that singing was no more dangerous than speaking, and, at lower dynamics, no more dangerous than breathing. It was this report that has informed attitudes to singing throughout the UK and further afield. Across the plethora of Facebook groups, it became clear that the desire to sing again, to be allowed to sing within the liturgy, was great. Sacred Music had been missed by the choristers, but what about the congregations? We were becoming used to online services, shorter in duration, and available to a much wider audience.

In St George's, resulting from the evidence from Perform, we were able to put our plan into action - utilising the entire church on Thursdays for choir practice, having reduced numbers on Sundays upstairs, all men distanced at 2 to 3 meters, and the under 12s at 1 meter. (Many of our trebles are within school 'bubbles', and are as a result, able to be even closer.)

For the choir, it was a wonderful experience to sing again, to work together in harmony, to listen to each other, and to rediscover our blend.

It's not easy.

When singing so far from each other, you miss the cohesion of the blend, and the quick thinking which allows you to adjust your tone to fit the singer beside you. For the younger choristers it's also very hard- they do not have the experienced choristers singing right beside them, guiding and instructing. We welcomed James Rogan as a chorister last month, but our other probationers have stayed away, staying within their school bubbles.

It is unlikely that we will be able to visit schools this year with a view to recruiting, although many of the new boys should come along next year. Planning is difficult. We can never be sure who will turn up until the online "safe-to-sing" form is complete. As school bubbles are all sent home for two weeks to self-isolate if in contact with a positive case, affected choristers must isolate and cannot attend choir for the fortnight, and towards the Hallowe'en break, 6 of our choristers were self-isolating as part of their class bubbles. So, we plan, we go ahead as normal, but we have to adapt quickly to sudden changes.

The upcoming season of Advent and Christmas focuses the mind. How do we prioritise services? Is the service of Advent carols more important than Advent 1? How do we manage the Nine Lessons and Carols? Is Midnight Mass more important than Christmas morning? Are these value judgements based on our desire to hear and sing familiar Christmas music or on true spiritual need?

For me, the service of Advent readings and carols is the most poignant of the year. It marks the beginning of the church year, the beginning of the penitential season, and the readings and carols reflect this. The atmosphere of darkness into light, of candles, plainchant, prayer and music, marks a coherent beginning. Outside, the world bustles in ignorance, and the Christmas hits are almost audible from Victoria Square. In St George's, we mark the important journey, culminating at Midnight Mass. It seems correct to keep these services and to forego Advent 1 and Christmas morning.

The service of Nine Lessons and Carols condenses the story of the birth of Christ into 90 minutes of music, readings and prayers. By this stage, perhaps we will be able to encourage singing in the congregation, albeit behind masks.

In St George's, as we look forward, we realise how important sacred music is to us and how it is an important part of the liturgy. The texts are brought to new life each week as we sing composers' inspiring depictions of the same words. We understand the frustration at not being allowed to sing, and that now, more than ever, it is vital that the choir worship on behalf of the congregation.

Whilst sacred music currently has been removed from the liturgy in many churches, and perhaps a time will come where it is only heard in concert performances for paying audiences, at this moment, we must consider ourselves grateful to the Meeting House style of St George's with its grand balcony.

Our world has been disrupted. Creative destruction, a phrase coined by Austrian economist, Joseph Schumpeter, has long been a catalyst for change. When such huge, life-changing events strike, out of the ashes comes new ideas, new perspectives, new ways of life.

## RATHLIN by Terence Mayne

Over the years my work has not given me time to climb Mount Everest or visit the North Pole. Serendipitously some D.J. on a half-awake early summer morning radio rattled on about volunteering on Rathlin West Light Bird Sanctuary. Seemed an adventurous idea to me, so



off for a two week stay in a two dormitory, self-catering, not the Ritz, cottage, with three girls and two fellows. Herbert is a horse player, Jack, an architect, or at least trying to be one. The females are more interesting. Bespectacled unsmiling Susan, a lead violinist, Josephine, blond, mysterious, well covered,

with a kisser that never seems to relax. She dresses well for the landscape and by her own accounts, is a class "A" twitcher. Then there is Cynthia, about as good a looker as a guy would wish to clap eyes on, tall and limber, eyes black as big as doughnuts, and to match, smooth hair, maybe blacker than the ace of spades.

We are here to work every day, walking two miles to the sanctuary to show the tourists puffins, kittiwakes, choughs, seals, dolphins and much else. There is one good looking unphotographed, seldom seen, golden Irish hare, perhaps with golden leverets to attract future visitors. Nature works in mysterious ways, go figure. In our spare time there is walking, cooking, reading, Radio 4 and chatting. The latter is most interesting amongst the educated strangers, although Josephine eccentrically, goes on at length about twitching. Amusing, fortunately.

When the dusk sees the night coming in very beautiful, we keep our ears peeled for the cry of the banshee, to be heard occasionally. Attractive to some, it is a thin screeching sound, somewhere between the wail of a woman and the call of a seal. Next comes lepidopterology. We make a moth trap with a light to attract them, and at say, 4.00 a.m. we go out, clipboard in hand, moth logging species by species, and, believe me, there are many.

As to history, Rathlin was the site of the first Viking raid on Ireland. In 1306 Robert the Bruce spent some time with the Bissett family in Rathlin Castle. There is no evidence of nights in a cave with a spider. Sad to say, truth is less interesting than ancient myth. Later, in the



sixteenth century, the McDonnells of Antrim threw the inoffensive Bissetts out. It is recorded that they moved to Ballycastle, opening a very profitable boarding house. From 1575 there have been at least six unpleasant massacres on the island. On the 6th July 1896 Guglielmo Marconi is said to have made the world's first transmission from the East

Lighthouse to Ballycastle. He won the Nobel Prize anyway, and on the 3rd August, just after his achievement, visited the Lammas Fair and took much drink. For further reading " Rathlin Disputed Island" by Wallace Clarke is essential reading.

Tourism is the top earner here. There is also a soap factory making the native seaweed and honey varieties, so popular in Mayfair and Palm Springs. All six of us brought bars home as presents. We were sad to leave after a very enjoyable fourteen days. I have kept in touch over the years. Herbert, or Hothorse Herbie, as his close friends call him, caught the small island history bug, sails to Tory, to learn lots from the King, no less, and later on to Clare Island for knowledge of the life and times of the Pirate Queen. He settles there, phoning Paddy Power every day. Jack luxuriates in Mongolia, living off the fees from designing a massive, state of the art, mosque in Ulan Bator. Susan is well married with four brilliant children, or so she tells me. Josephine shoots pheasants, staying in a castle with her financial advising partner. Her two boys, seven and eight, look like playing rugby for Scotland, so she tells me. Cynthia inherited a five-star hotel in Torquay, makes a great success of it and dances very well with the clients, so she tells me.

Your writer was privileged to have this adventure and the company. I suggest my peers should try it. No takers. Their loss.

## War or Peace by Jo Calder

Fr William wrote an excellent End-piece called "*Fight The Good Fight*". Part of his article touched on using the word *fight* in the context of religion and the Church. He particularly emphasised two hymns used a lot in Christian Church services: "*Fight the Good Fight*" and "*Onward Christian Soldiers*" (which then goes on to say "*marching as to war*"). He spoke of the fact he will not sing these hymns, and I totally agree with him. In my mind the analogy of "fighting" when in relation to Jesus is very wrong. From what we know of Jesus he was a gentle, compassionate man of peace, who never advocated the concept of fighting one another. In fact he emphasised we should love, not hate. Of course there was the time he lost his temper and disrupted those trading in the Temple, but surely that was totally justified. It was His Father's House and it was being defiled.

When we look back over many hundreds of years of our history, and that of other countries, there is a very long list of war, fighting and conflict. As an example we can start with the Romans conquering Palestine, and the dreadful way they dealt with those who didn't agree with them - not least their barbaric form of execution; Jesus suffered the most despicable form of death. There was the Spanish Inquisition and the dreadful torture and treatment meted out to those who disagreed, and all in the name of religion. The Crusades was another example of war and atrocities being carried out, again purporting to be of a religious nature. Fast forward centuries and many wars later and we come to the second world war and what happened at Hiroshima. And so it goes on; today there are many countries where conflict is very rife, and many thousands are dying, again in the name of religion. I don't need to say anything about the so-called "Troubles" here in Northern Ireland.

I just cannot understand why religion has to be used in this way, and why some people chose to do this. I recently saw a short news item about what I would term a cult in America, showing a special service – this consisted of hundreds of people packed into a Church and each person was carrying a gun. The women were all dressed in white, the men in suits and all of them wore golden "crowns" on their heads; many of these were made out of bullets. The reason for the service was that the pastor was blessing every gun in the building. Who was the pastor – Mr Sean Moon, related to the founder of the notorious cult called "the Moonies"? I'm sure those of us of a certain age will remember them very well! The Church is called World Peace and Unification Sanctuary Church and is based in Pennsylvania, and to

me its name is a total misnomer. The members of the church had been told by pastor Moon that if anyone attended the service without a gun they would not be welcome. This ceremony took place just two weeks after 17 people were shot dead in Florida. One of the Elders, when challenged about the debacle said the service was a blessing for couples and that the guns were “*a religious accoutrement*”. In the service the pastor prayed for “*a kingdom of peace police and peace militia where the citizens, through the right given to them by almighty God to keep and bear arms, will be able to protect one another.....*”. Perhaps I have been given the wrong teaching of my faith, but I don’t recollect any priest ever preaching this diatribe, or any Church having guns as an “accoutrement”, religious or otherwise.

On the other side of one religious cult being so “regimented” I remember another called “*The Jesus Army*”. I still recall seeing their bus parked in the City Centre, and their very colourful clothes. Naturally, they weren’t carrying guns, but they were no less insidious. As an evangelical Christian movement they took their preaching to the streets of the UK, Belfast included. Unlike the street corner evangelists we are so used to, they were less “in your face”, but still managed to bombard people with their literature, and their views on religion. One of their slogans was “*Love, Power, & Sacrifice*”. Perhaps I was judging them wrongly, but using the word “Power” strikes me more of war than peace. Unlike the Moonies, most of the members were quite young, and naturally targeted those of the same age group. I don’t dispute they did an amount of charity work which can only be for the good, but, as with other cults, there was also controversy surrounding them, particularly in relation to the founding member.

Of course any person or organisation which tries to advocate peace, love and helping others in need is, I think, what Jesus wants us to do. However, calling a religious organisation an Army, or blessing guns may **not** be what Jesus had in mind. I also am very aware the Salvation Army does amazing work in many areas, and of course has been established a long time, but again I find the inclusion of “Army” in their name still a little hard to come to terms with.

It is sad in the 21<sup>st</sup> century guns still have to be used for whatever reason is given, people are having harsh regimes imposed on them, so many are starving while others don’t know what to spend their money on next, there is modern slavery widespread in the world, there are still dictators ruling countries, and the earth which God gave is being destroyed. As Fr William so wisely said “***I think the next step we have to make towards the establishment of the Kingdom of God is to get the idea of fighting out of our systems.***” I hope he won’t mind me quoting him – he couldn’t be more right.

## *Endpiece by Karen Brett*

When I was younger I lived in a setting where Judaism, Anglicanism and Atheism were practised with the utmost seriousness. The discussions were rarely about the existence of God, or Salvation. The topic that was never exhausted was Faith.

This early experience prompted me to live and study for a period in Jerusalem, and I feel a warm connection with that time when I attend services at the Belfast synagogue with friends who belong to the congregation. I experience Christianity as a continuum of Judaism, and I love the resonances and echoes from the Jerusalem of 2000 years ago in our liturgies and prayers.

The person above all who has, for many years, been a touchstone connecting Judaism and Christianity for me, is Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. When I heard on November 7<sup>th</sup> that he had died unexpectedly, I felt a real sense of loss. I have never met him, but for years he has shared his thinking and beliefs through broadcasts, articles, and books. When he spoke, or in his writing, I felt he was addressing me and his delight in life was infectious. I didn't agree with some of his traditional thinking, but I know he would have been pleased that someone was engaging with his beliefs and ideas and would have embraced the opportunity to discuss them. During this year, his weekly newsletters have been both calming and inspirational. His office has just announced that, as he had prepared further postings before he died, they will continue to be sent to subscribers.

He has given another gift. His reflections on the nature of Faith are typically accessible and profound. For some people Faith is as simple as breathing. For others it's a slippery creature that eludes capture. Lord Sacks addressed it many times. As we move through Advent towards Christmas his definition, from the opening of his book 'Faith in the Future', has a resonance for Christians. '*Faith is the space where God and humanity touch*'.

At Christmas we remember and celebrate the event when God and humanity touched, embraced, and became indissolubly connected in the person of Jesus Christ. We share our faith with each other by participating in the life of our congregation and St George's is a dedicated earthly space where we are able to occupy the spiritual space created by God touching humanity. We can extend that space into the wider community and share our faith, not by using words to attempt to convert others, but by allowing our actions and advocacy to

protect, support and accept people who need our care, valuing them just as they are.

Instead of looking inwards and attempting to weigh our doubts and beliefs as a measure of *our* faith, let us accept that we are loved by God *because* of our flawed human nature, not in spite of it. Then use that understanding to take delight in life and valuing other people, as Lord Sacks did, and as a response to God consistent with our Christian faith.

If we live in the knowledge that we are sustained by the faith God has in us, which is immeasurably greater than any faith we can have in God, we allow the spiritual space where God and humanity meet, to spread beyond the confines of a church building and light up this especially dark and difficult winter.

Lord Jonathan Sacks:

*“Having faith in God means having faith in other people, and the measure of our righteousness lies in how many people we value, not in how many we condemn.”*

