

‘Why’s your Christmas tree still up?’ came the question, in a slightly accusatory tone and, once again, I explained how Christmas and Epiphany traditionally stretch beyond Twelfth Night until the we celebrate the Presentation of Christ or ‘Candlemas.’ Only then do the crib, the star and the tree come down.

It would be easy to give in and pack everything away straight after Christmas; to get in sync with the shopping/party season and move on to spring-cleaning just as quickly, but I like hanging on to the story long enough to take it in afresh. I like subverting what a casual visitor expects, and I’ve never seen anything but joy in the children who clap eyes on the tree and realise that we’re still celebrating baby Jesus in January! Like Simeon and Anna when they finally discover they have Jesus in their arms, I love to be caught up in wonder of God breaking into the ordinary, in new and unexpected ways.

At theological college, we were once sent into the Salisbury livestock market, to see if we might find God ‘up to something’ in an unfamiliar place. My encounter with the ‘chicken man’ still makes me smile: Feeling uncomfortable (what do you DO to find God in a livestock market?!) I was awkwardly loitering when chicken-man noticed me and asked if I knew anything about chickens? He began by telling me their names and breeds. Before long, he was describing their habits and personalities and I was laughing as I held the bird that had driven to market on his shoulder and had stayed put, even while he filled up with petrol!

He loved these chickens. They were his life and his joy. He thought everyone should keep chickens and his enthusiasm was infectious. He was a natural evangelist. I left the market knowing that one day, I would like to own some too. Don’t get me wrong (I still haven’t got chickens) but in 20 minutes, he had changed my take on fowl for life. He’d taken me from complete ignorance and lack of interest to an imagined future containing fresh eggs and quirky feathered companions. More importantly, God had given me a perfect lesson in faith-sharing.

Finding God at work in unexpected places is so much more fun than finding God in the usual ways! I love that God can still take me by surprise after all these years. A couple of weeks back, some friends (not church-goers) asked if we fancied meeting in a Guildford pub for a ‘Twelfth Night Garland’. None of us had a clue what to expect but agreed we’d just head to dinner early if it was no good. So it was that we found ourselves in a packed crowd of Morris

dancers, green men and amateur actors. Father Christmas was sharing a loaf of fruit cake, breaking off chunks for each us and speaking words of blessing, as he moved amongst us. Then came the large wassail cup – cider laced with so much brandy that I thought it best to pass! As I watched the broken cake and shared cup making its way around the pub, handed from person to person, regardless of whether they drank from it, I found myself recognising an unexpected holy moment, a communion of sorts that was being made amongst whoever happened to be in the Star that night.

Song sheets were handed out and the wassailing carols began: Salvation's story sung out by cheerful drinkers in holly crowns and flung together costumes. It was holy ground.

We couldn't hear the Mummers play but as they were making their way from pub to pub throughout the night, we planned to eat our dinner and re-join the throng in the final hostelry for a second go. So it was that we finished our night in the Royal Oak, standing room only, passing the wassail cup once again, meeting new people and singing salvation's story together. We squiggled up close enough to hear the Mummers tale, which was a strange mix: It seemed to involve George slaying the prince of Turkey who turned out to be Father Christmas' son who was then resurrected by the good Doctor after a fight between the angel of light and the devil. Then someone danced on the ceiling (yes, really!) and the pub's rafters were marked with a chalk blessing.

We were outsiders, not part of the troupe; we didn't have costumes or know what was expected, but despite all that, we were drawn in, told a story of hope and made welcome. As we were leaving, I asked about who the group were and whether this happened every year and before long we were talking about Epiphany, the wise men and my ministry. I left with a smile on my face and joy in my heart and you know what? I may not have got chickens yet, but I have a date in my diary for Twelfth Night next year and I am absolutely going wassailing!

May each of us find God revealed in surprising places as we journey into this coming year.

Every blessing,

Gillaine

St Michael's Shared Church, Sheerwater

## Good News

These photos which Jeannette Curtis took are from Dave Paterson's recognition service at Walton on 15 January where he was welcomed as a local preacher. More details in the next Wey Forward.

