

Christmas and New Year at Bledlow and Beyond!



St Paul's Cathedral – the Quire

Carols and hymns are Christianity's best advertisement. (Cue for raised eyebrows from all clergy reading this ...) Oh, all right: but when did you ever hear of someone being attracted to a church solely because of the sermons? Or the prayers? Yes, OK, I'm sure it happens. But (recognising my personal prejudices – and indeed, history – here) I believe that overwhelmingly people are drawn to the church because of the joy and beauty, the emotion and the imagery, in its sung music. They will forgive, or ignore, inconvenient doctrine and improbable stories in exchange for the experience of beauty – and kindness - in what the poet Philip Larkin called a 'serious house on serious earth'.

Or they did. Sadly, swathes of the church have now been infected with the virus of cheap, tawdry and meretricious hymnody; and (can it really be a coincidence?) church attendance generally has dropped off dramatically. But at Christmas an astonishing phenomenon manifests itself: despite widespread atheism and secular superstitions ('if it's on Facebook it must be true' – you know the sort of thing) an estimated 30 million people around the world tune in annually on Christmas Eve to listen to carols from King's.

Now, is every single last one a paid-up (or even a fellow-travelling) Christian? No, I don't think so either.

Is every single last one looking for something seasonal and, dare one say it, numinous in their lives? That's far more likely. Modern life certainly lacks a sense of wonder (or even, in a world glued to its smartphone, a sense of outside life at all.) And this is something the church, at its best, can supply: gentle thoughtfulness in a gracious building sanctified by centuries of use as a place where people have gone to mark what is most important in their lives.



Which is why the choir will be once again be singing at the Advent and Christmas carol services – and then, a couple of days later, journeying up hundreds of miles to Durham (*left*) to sing all the weekend services at New Year. This will be a huge undertaking for them in a wonderful building – and (special interest alert here) I have been reliably informed that the Durham organ is the best in the country. So we are all very excited at this challenge and opportunity – and perhaps even more challengingly (and opportunely) we will be singing Evensong in St Paul's Cathedral (*top*), no less, a week later on January 7th. Your choir is making a name for itself on the cathedral circuit, and, while we don't expect to see you up in Durham, we would love it if you could come and support us in the splendid surroundings of St Paul's (hint: Monday, January 7th at 5 pm) and welcome 2019 with us.

Cynthia Hall