

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2
The Arbitrators' Christmas Carol Service
15th December 2008 at 6.00pm
The Revd George R. Bush, Honorary Chaplain

A few years ago I was President of an historic clerical society and we were giving a party for hundreds of clergy, celebrating an important diocesan anniversary and at Lambeth Palace. Suitably identifiable in badge of office – as many of you – I stood at the gate with hand extended repeating, ‘Good afternoon, I’m George Bush, I’m the President...’ (wait for it!). After a good few minutes one of my colleagues rushed up and told me to stop that greeting as everyone assumed that I was a stray lunatic. Those who make jokes about my name will perhaps be familiar with the weary and pained smile; those who do it a second or third time well... But just for the next few weeks I think the boot may be on the other foot...

The Bishop of Indianapolis, Kate by name (for they have women bishops there) sent me a key-ring on which the seconds, minutes, hours and days of the Bush Presidency in America are being counted down digitally...Except that - either through my incompetence or an even more elaborate joke - the time has lately started counting up and at one moment seemed ominously stuck at 666!

Time of course is all we have – although it is the mostly unjustly apportioned of life’s benefits and the most difficult to value and control; a wasted afternoon may not look like much in the scheme of things, except when set against all else there is to do and the life of family and friends slipping by. In the new world we have entered in recent weeks, every bit as cataclysmically as that which emerged after 9/11 – we are faced with the revaluation of everything; our homes and possessions, our money and security; which will shape the years we have left. In the days of ready credit, we thought we had choice and choice was the most vaunted category of life-enhancement, to be able to sift and select, rather than scrimp and save; and yet we also had a kind of slavery and collectively we believed economic norms and mantras far less credible than the shibboleths of much religion.

In an extraordinarily timely book about debt, the novelist Margaret Atwood has suggested that what we may need is to re-learn the ancient art of living within our means. Christianity has always been appropriately nuanced in its valuation of simplicity. It has excoriated poverty where some have suffered because of the greed of others and yet it has valued simple, even ascetical living – as embraced by the monastic tradition – as an example that we may live the good life without the distractions of things and stuff. But poverty and simplicity can only be embraced when we learn to make time holy. The new Testament has two words for time; *chronos*, the rather neutral passing of

minutes and hours and *kairos* the propitious time, the hallowed moment. The seven services or offices sung in convents and monasteries each day are a sign that time is all we have and every moment needs to be lived to the full and with God.

Materialism has been found wanting; not just the materialism of you and me when we have chased after possessions and investments to bolster our self esteem believing matter to matter. But also the materialism of the proselytising atheists such as Richard Dawkins who will look nowhere other than in matter for explanations for life and refuse the existence of eternity.

And we shall now need some new heroes, for the heroes of the City and of indulgent celebrity have been found wanting. A young priest from the Cathedral made me flick through a copy of HEAT magazine; she wanted to see if there was anyone pictured there whom I recognised. I could find not one. A priest at the Jesuit Church in Mayfair ticked off some adult guests at a baptism who were paying no attention and twittering noisily in the background. They looked suitably shamed and afterwards the priest was asked whether he realised that he had just told off the Beckhams, Elton John and his partner. Reassuringly Fr Meredith was none the wiser!

But there is a clue here; because we need to trust not to the systems which we have created to make us rich, but to our common humanity which makes it possible to bear being poorer. The historical circumstances of Jesus' birth have been taken as a sign of the humility of God in stooping to be with us in the frailest and most chancy circumstances of human living. And the horrifying details of the death of Jesus have a like consequence for the sharing by God of the full terrors of selfishness, injustice and pain.

The developers on the vast site of the new St Bartholomew's hospital have engaged in typical contortions to greet us on placards on the perimeter of their site – although they can't but mention '*Christmas trees*', what they offer are resoundingly opaque '*Festive Greetings*'. I cannot believe that anyone but the people on the creaking PR committee concerned will be cheered. Let us be clear that we are celebrating a happy Christmas, the coming of God in human form, the appearance among us of the divine nature in the substance of our flesh. And this is nothing other than the ultimate endorsement by God of his total confidence in our humanity, and that we have within us the power and the grace to build his kingdom in love and justice; in time and, with Him beyond it.