

A Pychester Christmas Carol.

A Pychester Christmas Carol – a slightly subversive short story from the tangential world of St Pythagoras and All Angles, with a plethora of seasonal resonances amid the winter's snow. Occasional similarities to people and places you might recognise are unavoidable and kindly meant.

So fair a fancy few would weave in these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve, “Come; see the oxen kneel,
In the lonely barton by yonder coomb Our childhood used to know,”
I should go with him in the gloom, Hoping it might be so. (Thomas Hardy – The Oxen)

Christmas Eve 2015 and young Pychester University Graduates, Jo & Mary, one unexpectedly pregnant, are returning to Pychester from North Devon by Stagecoach Bus (more like a donkey jokes Jo) with no plans other than continuing to avoid their parents, who don't know about the baby which is due any day.

Jo works as an engineer for a Christian Green Energy company, Wave, Sun & Wind – the sustainable trinity. Mary teaches Maths & R.E.. It had been a bit embarrassing when the kids started talking – should've paid more attention in S&R lessons, Miss – but she really wanted this special baby now. Mary seems to have fallen pregnant at the Spring Equinox rave at Stonehenge, when she felt overshadowed by a white winged presence. Jo has no recollection of this and is mystified how it could have happened, but is forgiving and loyal.

The Shepherd family farms on the hills above the River Pyke and they have diversified into alpacas, providing wool to craft knitters producing Christmas jumpers for the well-heeled hunters of special gifts in London boutiques.

Last Christmas their new Evangelical Vicar banned the long established village West Gallery Band & Quire as “folk religion”. But the way he had done Church and shared Jesus at St Simon Says in Pychester didn't excite the country folk and tired commuters of Nether Pyke, and now he plays drums in his family Worship Group to a near empty Church. There will be no Midnight Mass, as he disapproves of the “M” word – everyone should be tucked up in bed by Midnight with an improving book or a partner of the opposite sex.

An Angel, or it might have been that advert for BBC Radio 6 Music, told the Shepherds, “There is still a place, where sacred music comes to life. A church like no other in Pychester, with one foot in its Victorian past, and one in the future. A place to make new friendships and discoveries, and find amazing live music. Where the next Mass or Motet you hear, could be the best church music ever composed. This is St Pythagoras & All Angles, where friendly people meet God in formal worship and fine music.” So they hied off to St Pythag's, and now they come and worship there, sweetly singing in the choir.

Three wise and wealthy men from London, that great Imperial city in the East, where you can buy anything and anyone if you have the finance, have travelled to Pychester St David's early on Christmas Eve from Paddington by Great Western Railway. First Class, of course, but that stretch from Newbury to Westbury still reminded two of them of the camel ride on last year's foursome holiday to see what little was left of the treasures of Persia with their wives.

They follow to where the bright red light hangs on the crane over the Guildhall redevelopment like Rudolph's nose, leaving their cases and gifts at the fully-booked Royal Lion Hotel. They are Thomas, a surgeon, Richard, a banker, and Harold, a software engineer and church musician.

Harold, mid-30s, is in a relationship with Lizzie, the pretty young Curate at their prosperous West London Church, St Anna's, mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary and patron saint of stair-lifts. They met at the Croquet-themed Lent Course and hit it off straight away, swinging his mallet firmly in her direction.

But Lizzie needs time for her Parish and parents at Christmas, and so has arranged for Harold, with Thomas & Richard, to volunteer, serving lunches and seasonal cheer to the homeless, at St Petrock's Centre in Pychester, for a few days. Go West, you men, she said, with a twinkle in her eye.

Thomas & Richard, late-50s, are long-time friends, with children not long left home and wives, Christina & Annabel, who have just started living together in Thomas's house. So Thomas has had to move in with Richard and they are looking at friendship and intimacy from a different angle.

Richard had joked at the Men's Advent Breakfast that there was more excitement these days in the bedroom department in John Lewis than in his marriage, and Thomas confided the "only connect" he had with his wife now involved Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The delight of young love, matured to full enjoyment of familiarity, had lapsed into lukewarm duty and indifference; affections spinning in strange new directions. Our love for God can go this way too; but He still loves us, though for a while we do not feel the need of him. The prodigal as well as the wise may have to return by another way – going the long way round.

However, they will all meet up for a civilised New Year party at Harold's parents' large house in the Cotswolds. 'Aga Father' Christians, Lizzie calls them, but their hearts are in the right place, running the local FoodBank and complaining to their MP about the impact yet another round of cuts is having on services in Bourton-on-the-Wold.

The three men have gifts ready for their partners; a warm golden alpaca Xmas jumper, a bottle of frankincense perfume (for the woman priest in your life, the advert said), and a cuddly Teddy (more in hope than expectation).

Their first clients for lunches at St Petrock's having been served and cheered, the men repair to Caffè Nerd, as Harold calls it, to skype Lizzie in St Anna's church office as she prepares for the Christingle service. "There's still a few of us left in the big orange," she says. "I've told Pixy you'll sing Midnight Mass at St Pythag's tonight, Harry. Choir practice at 10 o'clock sharp."

Jo & Mary are walking slowly in from the Bus Station past the 3 dozen decorated Christmas trees along the Roman Wall; so many needs, but so much charity, compassion and generosity too.

With no room at the Grandiloquent Carol Service at Pychester Cathedral, owing to Elf & Safety, Thomas, Richard & Harold head back to their hotel for canned carols and a wassail cup of local cider, just minutes before Jo & Mary are turned away from the cathedral too.

Paul, the Street Pastor, tells them the real Good News is at St Simon Says, but it's so noisy and crowded, and Jo & Mary feel fingers on Bible verses judging them; their lives outside this narrow sheepfold. The talk seems all about male headship and penile substitution, which is apparently not meant to be funny, as an angry God has sent his son to the cross in our place.

It was like they'd jumped 3 months and 30-odd years – it's Christmas, for heaven's sake! They leave as the preacher gets into his stride; never mind Mary on her donkey, God could just have sent Jesus in on the Palm Sunday donkey to save sinners, but this Christmas Jesus was kind of a first instalment in paying the price for our sins...

Pret a Manger is more welcoming and Jo jokingly asks if the Baby Jesus is in the Manger yet. There are Christmas sandwiches, warm smiles and Py-lattes (the only workout I can cope with now quips Mary, great with child), until it closes and they are out into the howling wind of a cold, cold winter's night.

In Candy Street, inspiration for Harry Potter's Diagon Alley, the shops selling Yuletide gifts, magic crystals, alternative therapies and baby clothes have all closed, and the clubs are getting lively. With a biting wind and snow in the air, as foretold by the weather forecasters, Paul Street was even more an Abomination of Desolation than normal. So Jo & Mary plod slowly now down to their old haunt at the City Gate Hotel.

Peter Shepherd holds the door open for them. "We're just warming the toes and tonsils before choir practice," he says. "Can I get you something?" Jo & Mary join his wife, Agnes, and their children, Shaun and Eve, high maintenance now but worth every pound, for a drink.

With the Hotel fully booked, the Shepherds suggest Jo & Mary come to St Pythag's with them for Midnight Mass. "You can come back with us afterwards," said Agnes, "we had Eve at Christmas 20 years ago; looks like you've not got long to wait now, Mary." "Where do we live, Shaun?" "Don't tell them, Nether Pyke!" And they all laugh.

"Jo's brother, Gabriel, sings at Salisbury," says Mary, blushing. Snow is falling, snow on snow, as they cross the Victorian Iron Bridge with its Narnia street-lights to St Pythag's Church. The sharp-eyed Peregrines watch from their lofty pinnacles as two young pigeons flutter past, but they are safe tonight; their sacrifice still 40 days away.

Mary & Jo sit at the back while the Choir rehearses Wood in F – can't believe it's not Rutter, as Gabriel calls it. They all seem to be bilingual in English and Latin and are rather good. Jo checks the history and geography of the place on the fascinating church website. One of the tenors looks like that new guy at Lizzie's church in London, thinks Jo, as Mary returns from the loo with the news. "Waters broken – I'm scared, love."

As the snow starts to settle on the mud where the hugely successful Christmas Market had been outside the Cathedral, Dean Ralph settles down inside to doze or fume as Francis virges Bishop Ric towards the pulpit for his traditional rant about sentimentality diluting the reason for the season.

As the bishop passes the golden icon of Our Lady (as other people called her) she shimmers and seems to speak to him; "Don't ruin their Christmas with all that ironic rhetoric about commercialism martyring St Boniface, father of the Christmas tree, again and Yuletide eclipsing Christmas. It was just as frantic in Bethlehem, and my gossiping in-laws were there for the census too. Your sheep are here now, scared for the future and needing our loving protection."

So he folds his script away, smiles at his flock and says, "Those who feel young at heart, as many as can fit, join me around our beautiful Crib. Prayerfully singing some more carols together will do us all more good than another sermon."

At St Pythag's the candlelight is not too dim nor the clouds of incense from the procession too thick for Mary not to notice her father and Uncle Thomas slipping in in the nick of time with snow on their shoes, as Ursa Polaris and the Full Moon smile down on an expectant Pychester.

"So that's why you two have been avoiding us all Autumn," whispers Thomas. "I thought you'd realised about Christina and Annabel, and were not as broad-minded as you young folk are supposed to be. How frequent are the contractions, Mary? I delivered you, as your mother will have told you, and unless you'd rather chance A&E at midnight, it looks like I may be delivering your baby too. Relax and let the beauty of the music and liturgy, and the mystery of the Incarnation waft over you. There's 150 years of faithful prayer and holy people around us. Is there a vestry if we need it?"

Fr Jonathan's sermon is based on Thomas Hardy's poem, *The Oxen*, 100 years old this very night. "Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock. Now they are all on their knees. When I was a rural priest on Dartmoor, the heavenly and the earthy came together more easily for country folk. The three great days were Rogation Sunday, Harvest Festival and Christmas; the church year and the farming year in harmony."

“But then as now, and at Waterloo and so on back to when Jesus was born, people were concerned, afraid despite the message of the Angels, at the necessary but nasty business of war where there should have been peace on earth. And while St Paul puts Love a little ahead of Faith and Hope, for many this Christmas, Hope for peace is top of their Santa list – the list of holy things, our prayers.”

“With the world and people moving so fast, so independent, so impersonal, we have the social media but do we really talk or listen? We have the communications technology but do we still have a message worth sharing? Tonight in the birth of the Christchild, the prince of peace, we do.”

They stop to look at the baby Jesus in his manger now; the familiar Holy Family that we need alongside the realities of the little town of Bethlehem. Jo wonders what Joseph, and his in-laws, made of it all. Soon he, Mary and the child would be refugees in Egypt for a few years, until Herod was gone and they could return to Nazareth.

The organist plays a suitably pastoral improvisation on the fine restored pipe organ, as they smile at Harry in the choir and wait to receive Communion. Getting up from the altar rail, Mary feels a movement, grabs Jo's arm and looks hopefully at Uncle Thomas.

Into the choir vestry, put on the heater, Richard gets some hot water from the steaming urn which the ladies at the back had felt might be needed, and grabs some tea towels, not for dressing up as shepherds now. This is a simple story, naïve some might say, so as the choir sings “In dulci jubilo”, the birth of this Christmas baby is swift “in praesepio ... matris in gremio” and safe “ubi sunt gaudia ... nova cantica”.

“We could call her 'Dulcie' then,” says a euphorically relieved Jo, “or 'Babybel' after your mother.” “I think she'll prefer 'Carol',” whispers an exhausted Mary, as she takes the baby in her arms for her first cuddle and feed.

At St Anna's in London, Revd Lizzie sits Christina and Annabel down amid the post-Mass chatter, prosecco and nibbles. “There's something I need to tell you – don't panic. By some strange miracle you've both just become grandmothers – your children seem to be just as complex as their parents. Somehow Jo & Mary are at Pychester with Tom & Dick, and Gabriel has just fainted in the choir stalls at Salisbury.”

“I know it's Christmas, but another virgin birth seems medically unlikely,” enquires Thomas doubtfully.

“Yes, sorry Jo, I didn't know how to tell you,” Mary replies. “I couldn't risk losing you. Remember we were visiting Gabriel at Salisbury for Passion Sunday and Annunciation. We've been friends so long, grown up together, you and he and me. Gabriel and I both wanted to see if there was more between us now. It was nice, and very effective, but it wasn't love. Gabriel is thinking about coming out – no, not leaving the Choir, silly, he loves floating around in that white surplice. But it's you that I truly love, Joanna. Happy Christmas.”

Richard Barnes – Church of St Pythagoras & All Angles – December 2015.