

A Pychester Christmas

In a city not so far away, a contemporary story with seasonal resonances unfolds. Christmas Eve, young graduates, Jo & girlfriend Mary, unexpectedly pregnant, return to Pychester by Bus (more like a donkey, jokes Jo) to avoid their parents who still don't know about the baby, due any day.

Jo's an engineer for a Green Energy company, Wave, Sun & Wind – the sustainable trinity. Mary teaches R.E. It had been 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 fell pregnant visiting Salisbury at Annunciation, overshadowed by a white winged presence, she says. Jo is mystified how this could be, but is loyal & forgiving.

The Shepherds farm on the hills above the River Pyke, diversifying into alpaca wool for craft knitters producing Christmas jumpers for the well-heeled hunters of special gifts in London boutiques. Their new Vicar has replaced the village's West Gallery Band & Quire with a Worship Group of his mates.

An Angel told the Shepherds, “There's a place, where sacred music comes to life. A church like no other in Pychester – St Pythagoras & All Angles, where friendly people meet God in formal worship and fine music.” And now they sing in the choir there.

Three wise and wealthy men from London, that great Imperial city in the East, where you can buy anything or anyone if you have the money, are also travelling to Pychester early on Christmas Eve. They're Thomas, a doctor, Richard, a banker, & Harold, a software engineer.

Harold loves Lizzie, the pretty young Curate at their prosperous West London Church, St Anna's (patron saint of stair-lifts and Jesus' grandmother). They met at the Croquet-themed Lent Course and hit it off straight away. But Lizzie needs time for her Parish and parents this Christmas, so Harold will serve lunches and seasonal cheer to the homeless for a few days.

Thomas & Richard are long-time friends with children not long left home, and wives, Christina & Annabel, who have started living together; traditional marriages turn complicated too. But 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.

Their clients at St Petrock's fed and cheered, Harold skypes Lizzie before her Christingle service. “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 decorated Christmas trees along the Roman Wall; so many needs, but so much compassion and generosity too. No room at the Cathedral Carol Service, packed with the great & the good. Jo & Mary try St Simon Says, but it's noisy and crowded, and they feel fingers on Bible verses judging them.

In Candy Street, the shops selling Yuletide gifts, magic crystals, and baby clothes have closed. With a biting wind and snow in the air, Paul Street is an Abomination of Desolation as they plod slowly down to their old haunt at the City Gate.



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.

The Hotel's fully booked, so they suggest Jo & Mary come to St Pythag's for Midnight Mass. “You can come back with us afterwards,” said

Agnes. “We had Eve at Christmas; looks like you've not got long now, Mary.”

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

Mary & Jo sit at the back while the Choir rehearses. They seem to be bilingual in English and Latin and rather good. One of the tenors looks like that guy at Lizzie's church in London, thinks Jo, as Mary returns from the loo with the news “Waters broken – I'm scared, love.”

The candlelight is dim, the clouds of incense thick, but Mary notices her father and Uncle Thomas slip in with snow on their shoes, as the Full Moon smiles down on an expectant Pychester.

“So that's why you two have been avoiding us,” whispers Thomas. “I thought you'd twigged about Mum & Annabel, and were not as broad-minded as you young folk claim to be. How frequent are the contractions, Mary? I delivered you, and unless you'd rather chance A&E at midnight, it looks like I may be delivering your baby too. Relax, there's 150 years of faithful prayer around us.”

The 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.’ In those days the heavenly and the earthy came together more easily for country folk. But then as now, and when Jesus was born, people were concerned, afraid despite the message of the Angels, at the nasty business of war where there should have been peace on earth.”

“And while St Paul puts Love ahead of Faith and Hope, for many this Christmas, Hope for peace is top of their Santa list – and our prayers. Will we listen and hear the Angels sing? 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. Soon he, Mary and Joseph would be refugees in Egypt, until Herod was gone and they could return to Nazareth. The organist plays a pastoral improvisation 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, get some hot water from the steaming urn which the ladies at the back had felt might be needed, grab some tea towels, not for dressing up as shepherds now.

This is a simple story, naïve you 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. “I think she'll prefer ‘Carol’,” whispers an exhausted Mary, as she takes the baby in her arms for her first cuddle and feed.

In London, Fr Lizzie sits Christina & Annabel down amid the post-Mass prosecco and nibbles.

“Don't panic, but by some strange miracle you've both just become grandmothers – Jo & Mary are with Tom & Dick in Pychester, and Gabriel has fainted in the choir stalls at Salisbury.”

“I know it's Christmas, Mary,” enquires Uncle Thomas doubtfully, “but another virgin birth does seem medically unlikely.”

“Yes, sorry Jo, I didn't know how to tell you. We've been friends so long, grown up together, you, Gabriel and me. He loves floating around in that surplice. But it's you I truly love, Joanna.”

Richard Barnes – Dec 2015, abridged Nov 2016.