

## Children's Questions About Nativity

The Telegraph

ISSUE 2031 Saturday

16 December 2000

**(Prompted by her children's questions about the Nativity, Imogen Stubbs set out to discover whether the church she lost contact with when she was a child has anything to offer her now.) {Photo caption – Inspiring: but Imogen Stubbs found the Russian Orthodox Church in west London was like a film without subtitles.}**

"It all started with a typing error. My daughter came home clutching her script for the Christmas play and said she needed to borrow the vacuum cleaner. When I asked why, she said rather grandly: "Because I'm playing a Hoovering angel." At which point – not to be outdone on the religious implement front – my four-year-old son piped up: "Does Jesus have a spade?" When I asked why, he said: "For digging dead people and rabbits up to get them to heaven for Xmas." "It's not Xmas, you moron-head," retorted my daughter. "It's not the birth of little X. Xmas is just a spelling for people like Mummy who don't go to church or believe in Christ but still want the alcohol and presents and stuff." "Oh, okey-dokey," conceded my son, "like the Three Kings . . ." This felt like a good moment to divert them with an Xmas gem I had stumbled upon: The Santa Interactive Phone Card. This allows your children to phone Father Christmas, fill him in on all the presents they want, and then relatives can phone and get the list of demands: "OK – Listen up, Santa! No board games, no Narnia books – but if you can get that game with the Space Iguanas that burp when you zap them, it'd be cool."

However, my son was not to be deflected. "I wanna go to church!" "Well you can't," I snapped. "We don't do that – we do fun stuff like going to shows and shopping. Anyway, church is gloomy and there are no snacks – except Jesus. . . sort of. . ." There was an appalled pause and then my tearful daughter whispered: "Can't we at least be Jewish?" This shameful event is the rather convoluted explanation as to how in the weeks leading up to Christmas, I have found myself wandering into different churches, not in search of "London's top churches for Christmas", but in the hope of enlightening and educating myself about Christianity as it is presented today.

When I was a child, I was a member of a choir in a Church of England church – though I'm afraid my involvement was largely for financial reasons – five shillings for christenings, funerals, etc. I loved the bell-ringing and the candles and the thin, musty-smelling paper in the prayer books. I loved the mysterious words (like "trespasses") that stalked through the hymns and prayers and resonated somewhere within me, although I hadn't a clue what they meant. I adored the carols and hymn-singing, and the sort of oceanic feeling that was generated by lots of voices singing with commitment for the benefit of something beyond ourselves. What I loathed was the subjection – the bent heads, the scratchy kneelers, the dismally intoned responses pitched so high that most women sounded in pain, the shuffling involved in the queuing for the bread and wine, the tense mouths and foreheads, the hierarchies and rules and certainties imposed by the church. The whole atmosphere felt wrong to me. Instead of celebrating the miracle of life, we seemed to be stuck on the Crucifixion. During the liturgy, instead of joy and release, there seemed to be an uneasy sense of damp souls, incapable of taking flight, impaled on their own suffering and sorrow and sin. And I became increasingly confused by how literally we were supposed to take the Bible. "In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." If so, then God was a word, which was why my young imagination would go bonkers and get stuck at the three letters, G-O-D. And I started feeling guilty that each of us alone was the biographer of God, and that he could only exist if we could express or perceive or prove him. And since I couldn't, where did that leave Christ and the teachings of the Bible?

The only time I felt really transported was when I escaped through the church doors into the natural world again, where I sometimes genuinely felt inexplicable feelings of awe and wonder when, say, the light on a leaf would astonish me. And I would experience that ineffable feeling that wells up within us, between a breath and a heartbeat, that momentarily arrests us with a sense of something far greater than ourselves, but is gone by the time we reflect on it. That moment which – to adapt Dylan Thomas: ". . . makes us laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toenails

twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own." It seemed that to trust in this intuitive response might not be belief – in the way that it is taught by organized religion – but the willing suspension of disbelief, a willingness to be transported to a state of uncertainty when an indefinable experience can work through our hearts in a mysterious way that leads to love and compassion and humility and seems to me to be the key to our humanity. And I'm afraid I stopped going to church and joined the ranks of the ever-hopeful bewildered. That is not to say I didn't envy those sustained by the certainty of their faith – but I also found it a bit spooky. So I suppose my reluctance to take my children to church was from fear and selfishness – a selfish desire for them to discover a sort of unimposed Pantheism; and a fear they would get Hoovered into some fanatical didactic faith and lose the wonderful imagination that allowed my daughter to assert recently: "This is how the world began – first snow, then April and then to confuse man – infinity." And led to my son describing God as looking "just like the Queen – same fluffy ears". Anyway, I picked four churches close to where we live and went along knowing virtually nothing about them except that they all offered very different services.

The first was a 5pm Sunday service at Kensington Temple. I took my son and a large bag of pig-shaped sweets. Going through the doors was unlike anything I had ever encountered. It was very brightly lit, with large screens and televisions everywhere, and cameras pointing in all directions – rather as I imagine The Jerry Springer Show to be. On the screens was written "KTG12 vision" and messages such as "Jesus hears our righteousness," and "Chewing gum not permitted". There was a tremendous buzz in the packed congregation that felt just like an expectant audience at a musical, and encompassed people of every age and race – many in really funky hats and dark glasses, a few in twinsets and pearls. Suddenly, a gospel choir appeared, the musicians grabbed their instruments and the music started. It was absolutely electric – like being at a Tina Turner concert. Jesse and I were singing and dancing (the words were on the screens) feeling very happy and celebratory. I've always wanted to clap in church and there was lots of clapping and hugging. We only got a bit confused when one chorus involved shouting out, "Win consolidate disciple send", which felt a bit like yelling out the answers to a crossword puzzle. It got hotter and hotter and then the singing stopped and a man started talking about inner-healing by e-mail on the church website, and the availability on video of Katie's vision. I was explaining to Jesse that Katie must be a biblical figure I'd forgotten, when I realized that it stood for Kensington Temple and that the KTG12 vision wasn't the brand name of their television equipment but their "Win consolidate disciple send" creed – an evangelist cell-network scheme for winning people round to God. Then the minister of the church appeared and filled every screen. He sounded just like Bob Monkhouse and talked faster and faster into the microphone, with a combination of humour and fanaticism, till I swear I heard "Gideon the great" "Oh shay ti ti la la" and "Bouncy castle" all in the same sentence. Meanwhile, Jesse was getting more and more hyper on the sweets, and kept asking if I'd get them to put Bob the Builder on the video instead of Katie.

At this point, a group of cell out-reach leaders came on stage to advertise their particular evening groups, and it did get like a television quiz show: "And you are?" "And where do you meet?" "What's the post code?" Just as I thought one lady was going to say "Can I phone a friend?" something totally heart-stopping happened. The minister touched the woman's hand, blew into the microphone and she keeled over and crashed to the floor. Jesse immediately shouted "Get an ambulance" but all around us, people were shouting "Hallelujah" and the minister was saying "Fasten your seat belts, the Holy Ghost's comin' to getcha, we're in for a bumpy ride", and people started dropping like flies – laughing or talking in tongues like people possessed. Just as I was feeling a terrible impostor, not knowing whether to pretend I was filling-up with Jesus or not, everything calmed down and everyone seemed to return to normal. Everyone, that is, except Jesse who made himself so hyper doing ambulance siren noises that I had taken his sweets from him. Just as the minister whispered in hushed tones "And they tasted of His anointing and got charismatic" a terrifying voice filled the church: "GIMME A PERCY PIG – NOW". As we were leaving a man asked Jesse his name. When he told him, the man smiled and said "I knew there'd be a J in there somewhere."

At 10am on a Tuesday morning I found myself in The Church of the Death of our Lady – the blue-domed Russian Orthodox church right next to the A4 in Chiswick. No-one seemed to speak English except a very sweet old lady who gave me a head scarf and a candle and said: "If you want to, place it with the candle of our Lord or our Lady – whoops, I'd better light them." Even though the building is new and unfinished, there is already a residual sense of something powerful inside. This is enhanced by the richly sensuous experience of incense and candles flickering against hauntingly melancholy icons, and perhaps by the lack of unaesthetic technology being flaunted – there is no sense of "immortality dot com," or "Now buy the video." A woman came in with wild flowers, clasped in an old hanky, and scattered them tenderly about the icons, each of which she kissed passionately.

As I stood staring towards the altar with five other adults and a little boy, a beautiful young girl started to sing behind us. As she was joined in her responses by six other voices in a ravishing choral harmony, a pigeon flew out of a hole in the domed ceiling and swooped about. I found myself feeling intensely peaceful, and happy in that sad sort of way that I associate with opening a chink in the armour of skepticism that comes with the harm of years. My only problem was that once the priest began the service, everyone crossed themselves in a "head, shoulders, knees and toes" sort of way literally hundreds of times. In order not to seem out of place I tried to do the same – and looked like someone lagging behind in a workout class or Jonesy in Dad's Army. The only other problem was my relationship with the little boy. I'm currently in a childrens television series in which I regress to being a child with a silly catch-phrase that I use repeatedly. Throughout the service, the boy kept leaning over to me and whispering "Hey – frog breath," until his father clouted him affectionately across the head. At the end of the service, everyone ate what looked like blessed shortbread, under which were bits of paper with the names of people who had been remembered in prayer. Then they all had seconds and chatted with the priest and kissed and laughed and went outside for a cigarette. I loved the whole experience but this may well have been because it was a bit like being in a wonderful Russian film without subtitles.

Next, I visited the now-famous Holy Trinity Brompton for the Sunday service at seven o'clock. Once again, the church was brightly lit and carpeted, with sophisticated technology everywhere from screens to a vast sound-desk, and there was acoustic guitar music playing as we arrived. The church was packed with astonishingly well-dressed, good-looking people who were utterly delightful and welcoming to everyone who came through their doors – it was rather like going into Gap in New York. I sat in the balcony on large carpeted steps, along with lots of young people leaning against each other or lying down, and for the first ten minutes we listened or sang along to really pleasant folksy music which reminded me of Godspell. It was performed on a stage by two boys and girls who would have looked equally at home supporting the Corrs in concert. Indeed, I kept expecting one of them to shout "Hello Knightsbridge!" and for everyone to hold up their lighters. After a clip on the screens praising Alpha (which is obviously this church's version of the KTG12 vision) for their inspiring community-based work with prisoners, there was a talk from a charming prison chaplain which made me wonder how much it actually means to most defendants to swear on the Bible. Then the service and the prayers were taken by Sandy Millar who (I gathered from a leaflet) has run the church for many years. He was dressed in a jumper and tie and came across as a forceful intelligence and immensely likeable. The only other thing on the stage with him was a large box of Kleenex. The congregation laughed and clapped and held their palms up to Heaven but less fervently than KT – in some cases slightly bashfully.

Only as I was leaving did I catch a glimpse of a queue of people waiting for a gentle laying on of hands. And I became aware that all over the church people were weeping and being comforted, or just sitting together holding hands listening to the music. Actually, to be honest the service hugely reminded me of boarding school – shifting between a lecture hall atmosphere, and sitting on the carpet in someone's study late at night while people played guitars and philosophised, and then inevitably someone would get emotional and everyone would comfort them. I may well be wrong but looking down at the congregation, I sensed maybe some of them were yearning back to the safety of school, where you were given a structure and a set of friends and values and beliefs – and a lovely house-master was always there to offer guidance and catch you if you fell.

In the foyer were leaflets for all sorts of free counselling groups dealing with problems with divorce, drugs, even learning the guitar. There was a glossy magazine for the church that made it look like a cross between a fabulous campus and Club Med, with ski and nowboard Christian chalet holidays and lots of photos of gorgeous young people on Alpha courses asserting "At the heart of our faith is the heart".

Unquestionably there was nothing spooky about the people involved at Holy Trinity Brompton. They all genuinely seemed possessed with decency, compassion and humanity, and intent on spurring each other to good works. It was easy to see how people – especially those who otherwise might have spent a lifetime and a fortune in therapy – could get addicted to this world. All faith is fantastically personal of course and, hastily redefining my own sense of spirituality, I felt that for me the service and the high tech gadgetry lacked the mystery that might allow my particular soul to take flight into areas of wingedness and boundlessness, so to speak. And I did wonder if you were allowed to share in the community spirit and good works of Holy Trinity Brompton without believing in the Bible, or whether there was a sort of time pressure on how quickly you needed to be born again to Jesus – whether Born Again Christianity was a microwave as opposed to the slow-oven approach of most religions?

On Thursday at six o'clock, I went to the Jesuit church of the Immaculate Conception in Farm Street. The church is dimly lit and incredibly beautiful, and is a haven from the hurly burly of Mayfair life. About 20 people were kneeling in pews, each as isolated and private as possible and there was a palpable sense of anguish in the air. The priest, who had a marvelous voice, was saying, "the footsteps of those who bring good news is a welcome sound," at which point a mobile phone went off. It was playing "The Ride of the Valkyries." The reaction from the congregation could not have been worse had Judas himself put in an appearance, but no amount of whacking and button-pressing would silence the sound. Eventually, the poor owner removed himself, and the service continued with all its Catholic solemnity and ceremony. And when the bell rang and the priest said "O Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us" I realised that I was deeply moved by the very melancholic beauty that had alienated me as a child. After the service, I saw the mobile phone owner put money in a box for "Holy Souls" and hurl himself into the confessional.

What did I take from these experiences? In truth, I found myself responding to location and theatricality rather than content because I still find religious certainty enviable but unsettling. But I also now recognise that at different stages in our brief lives we need solace and guidance to help us brave the secret and undiscovered road ahead of us. I suppose really we should introduce our children to every kind of religion and let them decide. And yet in the Talmud, I believe it is written: "Over every blade of grass is an angel that whispers 'Grow grow'". I still can't help wondering if the angel, the receptivity, is there in children and the problems only come when the instinct is hijacked and harnessed in an attempt to regulate it. So as a compromise, I'm presently seeking an outdoor carol service in the Lake District.