

## **Views from the Pews - The time they cancelled Christmas**

'Merry Christmas' is a familiar phrase, but it comes freighted with more controversy than you might imagine.

The 1600s in England were a time of unprecedented upheaval in the Church. Only two things were certain; Sunday attendance was compulsory, and Catholics were banned. Control was largely exerted from above, but distance from London, coupled with growing literacy, enabled vigorous debate about worship, and about the appearance of churches. There was what we would now recognise as a culture war. This contest began with Sundays – were you allowed to play sport, drink, or indulge ancient pre-Christian traditions after Church? Many thought that those traditions – making 'merry' – were part of an ancient identity linked to one's village or county.

The other view, espoused by those we still tend to label as Puritans, held that such activity was offensive to God, and that it would attract heavenly retribution. Sunday was for long services, long sermons, and much Bible reading in between. This debate still plays out in our political and social life in this country; most of us can remember when shops were shut on Sunday, there was no public sport, and alcohol was kept out of sight.

At one stage, there were serious attempts to cancel Christmas, on account of the 'pagan' practices it encouraged. Too much eating and drinking, too much of the 'Merry', all linked to over-decorated churches. Too much fun all round.

So some church buildings were actually locked on 25 December, in an attempt to purge the day of both Pagan and Catholic influence. Many found this 'cancel culture' just too much, and the pendulum duly swung back, being one of the driving forces behind the Restoration, with its cultural re-birth, and (no doubt) the return of delights such as choral music.

This history of violent swings, bitter debate, and excessive top-down control helped form what we know as Anglicanism today; space for a spectrum of different views and practices, a preference for the middle ground, and a full role for both Bishops and laity.

So it is probably with a clear conscience that we put heart and soul into our Christmas worship, but that we sleep well after Midnight Mass (now there's an explosive word), and wake on the morrow to leave for the beach, our cars laden equally with outboard motor fuel, cake, and beer.

A Merry Christmas to all.

*Richard Swarbrick*