



The Blue Peter bellwether

It was a bit unfair to single out one statistic, namely the viewing figures for *Blue Peter* on a repeat screened at 2.30pm on a Wednesday, but the BARB viewing figures showed that it had no viewers: not even a granny tuning in by mistake: absolute zero.

After this factoid got traction in the media, the BBC released a flurry of more positive statistics about *Blue Peter* viewings on “Catch-up”, visits to the website etc.etc., but you can’t hide a general truth: viewing figures for this programme are in freefall. From the millions to the hundreds of thousands, and sometimes less.

Now, coming from the Church of England, I have sympathy with any organisation where figures show decline.

But what does the Blue Peter syndrome tell us?

My suspicion is that it doesn’t tell us that children are no longer interested in watching the type of material that is shown on *Blue Peter*. I caught a bit online to remind me and the item—about a cheese challenge—looked to me the type of stuff my seven year old son and my nine year old daughter would each like to watch. The presenter seemed nice enough too in an eager, *Blue Peter* type way.

The problem for *Blue Peter* is not the content; the problem is the channel.

When I was a child, there were only four channels, and there’s a good chance that the most interesting

thing on TV at ten past five on Mondays and Thursdays was *Blue Peter*.

Now, children grow up without any ‘appointments to view’: I don’t think my children know what “BBC One” is; television for them is just an on-demand screen, provided by BBC Iplayer, BT Vision and Netflix, and once they find a programme, they hook in and bleed it till it’s dry. For my kids, the cut through items are: Steve Backshall (deadly animals), Ninjago (a lego based serial with characters who are ninjas!) and, for the youngest, Thomas the Tank Engine. When they very occasionally scroll through the TV options, ‘Blue Peter’ won’t mean anything to them anyway.

If the problem is less the content, than the channel, then what does this mean for other relevant situations? What does it mean for Church, and faith in general?

It does mean that, whether church attendance figures go up or down, one should be less tempted to view that as a barometer of spirituality across the nation.

Attending the church is arguably more about ‘channel’ usage than anything else. It links to the ultimate content, God, but it doesn’t limit him. Maybe we vicars need to think less about the content of our services than the channel we inhabit.

July 2017. *Thought for the Train* is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk. You can find this online at <http://surbitonchurch.org.uk/category/thought-for-the-train/>