



When you are 'on trend'

Our church attendance at Christmas was up again this year: after years of increases, we are up 75% on the figure from ten years ago and attendance is as high as it has been in living memory. It's not just us; nationwide more people are attending Church of England services at Christmas than they did a decade ago.

Now upward trends are not what the Church of England is used to. And Sunday by Sunday, the trend nationwide isn't so healthy. But for once, let's focus on the positive.

For eight of the last ten years, clergy have downed tools on Christmas Day afternoon with a slight spring in their step that so many more people have joined them to celebrate. On the whole, it's a pleasant feeling.

But let's go the other way. Imagine we were working at John Lewis or wherever, where, despite ever more imaginative strategies to drive footfall, you simply aren't getting the sales before Christmas that you used to. It would be easy to feel down on yourself.

And that would be a mistake. High Street retailers are just caught in a killer grip of high rents and migration to online channels. For sure, there will be some heroic stores showing an increase in profits, with their fingers in the dyke, but essentially, it's the same picture of decline.

For the Church and its Christmas increase, there are a jumble of reasons, and who knows, one of them may

be a somewhat inchoate idea that there is something greater at work in this universe than just chugging around on a conveyor belt of consumerism. I like to think so.

But the mistake would be to personalise it. In my case, to believe that the rise in attendance is down to my own brilliant ministry. Now, it may also have *something* to do with the fact that we are offering better services than we used to, but I wouldn't go overboard on it.

Rather, there are a myriad of wider factors. To take just one example, the Church may even be a fringe beneficiary of online sales. Where once consumers were so time pressed that the only time they could go shopping was on Christmas Eve at 4pm, now they've squeezed their shopping online into a slot between 9pm and 11pm on Tuesday 18th December and they are a lot freer with their time in the 24 hours around Christmas. Or parents are more likely to take Christmas Eve off work. Or...

And realising that it's not really about us is rather liberating. Often, as the psalmist puts it, we can 'rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil', but all in vain, because we haven't allowed the LORD to 'build the house'. We think that only we can make the difference, which is not just nonsense but stressful and conducive to feeling like a failure. Knowing that mostly our direction is set by wider forces is not just true: it fosters a more balanced way of life.

Jan 2019 Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.