

# CHRISTMAS MORNING IN SHEPHERDS BUSH

## Laughter in Church!

As I mentioned in the December/January magazine, I spent Christmas with my son, Toby, and his family in Shepherds Bush, London, W12. Last year, on Christmas morning, I was delighted to find a thriving Anglican church just a few minutes walk away, so, once again, I strolled across Shepherds Bush Green and along the Uxbridge Road towards Queen's Park Rangers Football Club ground to the church of St. Stephen and St. Thomas, one of the many churches built in mid-Victorian times at the instigation of Bishop Blomfield of London.

I had been attracted initially by the church's informative website which talks about the diverse community of Shepherds Bush and describes the church as offering services that 'blend Anglo-Catholic liturgy with evangelical preaching.' There are Alpha courses during the week and incense in church on Sundays. This spoke to me of an original mind in charge of the liturgy and, indeed, Fr. Bob Mayo is a lively presence who is unafraid of plain speaking.

He began his sermon to the seventy-ish people gathered in his church on Christmas morning by asking his brilliantly talented young organist/pianist, Sam, to switch on his laptop and play the famous old music-hall song, 'The Laughing Policeman'! *'I'm determined to get people to laugh in church'*, explained Fr. Bob. He went on to say, *'My challenge in doing this is that I've never thought of the Bible as being particularly funny, although the Old Testament is funnier than the New. In the New Testament Peter makes a joke on the day of Pentecost. The onlookers saw the disciples speaking in other languages and thought that they must be drunk. Peter replied 'We are not drunk; it is only nine in the morning.' The inference being – give us some more time and we might be!'*

Fr. Bob pointed out that because of the short staccato journalistic style of reporting in the Gospels, we never see the details of Jesus' interaction with people. For all we know, there may have been much laughter. Fr. Bob was careful to illustrate the difference between laughter at someone else's expense and laughter as an expression of joy. Laughing together helps people to be less self-conscious in each other's company and less respectful of hierarchy. *'It is the Fool in King Lear who provides the few instances of humour in the play. Yet it is also he who is the most insightful and offers the possibility of restoration and renewal.'*

As he preached his way towards Christmas Day, Fr. Bob had made people smile with stories from within the parish: a Joseph who had turned up five minutes after the performance had been due to begin; two different people wanting to play Mary; a brother and sister who carried an argument into the nativity play and started to hit each other with angels' wings! On Christmas Day itself, he wanted to make people **laugh**. As he explains, *'The Heavenly Hosts were praising God, the Shepherds were rejoicing and the Wise Men were worshipping but were any of them laughing? I recorded the Laughing Policeman and decided to play it to the congregation.'* Sam sang the old Slade hit, 'So here it is, Merry Christmas', and Fr. Bob did a jig down the

aisle. Success! Everyone was laughing and together we had touched the joy of the Christmas story.

*PM*

*(With grateful thanks to Fr. Bob Mayo for supplying the text )*