

## Midnight Service 2022: John 1:1-14 'To all who received him'

Last month it was announced that, for the first time since records began, the Census recorded fewer than half the population describing themselves as 'Christian'. Cue much hand-wringing about this, from all sides. For some the sky was falling in; others felt a need to apologise and explain; and a few were openly exultant, raising the old chestnut about secularising the state and disestablishing the Church.

(As an aside, it would take parliament so long to do that, they wouldn't be able to do anything else, so realistically that will never happen. Plus many of the people who argue for that don't realise that the Church is not funded by the state, like it is in parts of Europe, it has to pay for itself. So it doesn't cost the taxpayer anything to have a state church. But I digress.)

Some people have asked me what I think about all this, and here's my answer: I'm not that troubled by it. Essentially what has happened over the last 20 years in particular is that people have stopped pretending. Affiliation is not the same as affirmation, and very long way from participation.

Attendance at church has not changed much in the last twenty years: it's dipped in the historic denominations and grown in the new churches, and in total about 10% of the population still attends some form of Christian worship at least once a month, and a further 10% attend a club, group, event or charitable endeavour that the church runs in that month. About a third of the population in total will go to something around Christmas – and all of those figures are still well short of the 47% who declare themselves to be Christian on the census.

Overall, about a third of those who ticked the Christian box in 2001 decided not to in 2021 – but I imagine very few of those were keen practising Christians who lost their way, or gave up on God. Actually I think for the vast majority who ticked 'no religion' for the first time last year, what they gave this time was the honest answer. And I respect that, because in a funny way what it shows is they actually place a *higher* value on faith than a lower one – and here's why. It's precisely because **a lot more people now admit that faith is something that has to be real, has to be practised**, that they knew they couldn't tick the box.

The days when all it took to call yourself a Christian was something that was done to you with a few drops of water when you were a month old, and very little else for the next 70 years, have gone – and we should be thankful for that! It bears absolutely no relation to the kind of life that Jesus called us to, the life that John talks about in our majestic gospel reading. We are invited into God's beautiful, life-changing life, to become, as the text puts it, 'children of God'. We are invited to receive this life: not as passive observers but active participants.

It's significant that John defines the call in two ways in v12: to believe in Jesus' name – which is how faith is often described – but also **to receive Jesus. Jesus opens his arms to us – and invites us to open our arms to him.**

This is radical stuff, powerful stuff – and now for the first time in centuries we have the chance to describe it with fresh voices to fresh ears.

It's also a message of belonging: large numbers of people are admitting on the census that they can no longer say they belong to a religion: but in this passage Jesus invites us to a new kind of belonging: to belong to him. The church is not just a human institution: it is the body of Christ, a community of love – to join it we don't need to apply, we need to *receive*.

And **no-one is beyond the love and grace of God.** **'To all who received him'** – not just to some, not just to the respectable, or those who try hard, or those who were born into the right country or the right family, or those who've never been convicted of a crime, or those who can read and write, or those who are needy, or indeed those who aren't – whatever category or qualification you try and apply, Jesus himself rejects it. Jesus is the one who gives us the right to become children of God, and his invitation is simply this: to all who receive me... to *all* I give this right.

You may have never heard this before. You may have heard this once but never really acted on it. You may have heard it many times and stopped believing it for a while. Or you may be fully signed up to it – it doesn't matter, the invitation is the same. Whatever you put on the census, Jesus is the same, and the invitation is the same. **Jesus is calling you – and Jesus will receive you.**

As we gather on this sacred night to welcome the birth of the Son of God, let's hear again the glorious news which led to his coming. It's a message for everyone, it's message of life, it's a message of belonging – will you receive it?