

Some of us attending midnight mass last year may have found the connection between the incarnation of God and Nicola Benedetti's beautiful music video of the tango "Por una Cabeza" a bit hard to get. I was so caught up in it that I assumed others would be, too; perhaps having seen it about 50 times before Christmas, I had the advantage. (Interestingly the people that did "get it" were almost all under 30...) No stranger, though, than God using the circumstances of Jesus' birth to get our attention, hoping we would get it - in due course, when it had sunk in what He was doing.

Strange also, was a Holy Communion service I took in a small town of Teliban influence in Pakistani Kashmir, in an open field behind the main trading street, on what, locally, was an ordinary day: 25 December 2005. In full vicar kit of cassock, surplice, hood and scarf, standing at an altar which was a very large rock covered with a cloth and bedecked by the RN church pennant, I gradually became aware that, in addition to the UN relief-aid congregation, an extended group of onlookers had gathered. Children on their way to school, workers, women fetching and carrying, all of whom had the same bewildered look. Even if they were familiar with what these strange Christians do at the end of December, I expect they would find it stranger still if they knew that we were celebrating the birth of their prophet Isa Ibn Maryam ("Jesus" to us!) by commemorating the eve of his death. (Perhaps Overy has got it right by having carols and lessons on Christmas Day.)

Some of the military commanders there thought I was nuts making such a target of myself (*don't say it...*) but it seemed such a small risk compared to the one God took with his very own begotten son. The point is, I think, that there is nothing normal about Christmas - it gets a reaction one way or another. The fact that it is happening still in a big way in this post-post-modernist, cynical, materialistic, irreligious society is strange indeed. As, indeed, it was obviously strange to that town so far away.

Nonetheless, for the majority of us, it is still a time when we buck the trend of everyday expectations and dare to adopt a largess in our relationships with stranger, friend - and relative! - alike. It looks like, then, God did know what He was doing after all. Strange as it may seem.

And so, if I do something strange again this Christmas, you might take into account that it is a strange time. And strangely, if I don't do something strange this Christmas - well, that will be strange, too. I wish you, therefore, a strange Christmas - and a stranger New Year.