

Church News Ireland



Image of the day – Christmas harmony

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Christmas harmony

First page photo - The Choir of St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh with Canon Peter Thompson, former Organ Scholar of Belfast Cathedral and the Dean, Very Reverend Shane Forster, former Chorister and Lay Clerk at Belfast.

The majority of choirs every Christmas sing the hymns of Cecil Frances Alexander who had strong links with Derry and Armagh Cathedrals.

Cecil Frances Alexander was a hymn writer and poet. Amongst her works are "All Things Bright and Beautiful", "There Is a Green Hill Far Away" and the Christmas carol "Once in Royal David's City."

Cecil Frances Alexander was born at 25 Eccles Street, Dublin, the third child and second daughter of Major John Humphreys of Norfolk (land-agent to 4th Earl of Wicklow and later to the second Marquess of Abercorn), and his wife Elizabeth (née Reed). She began writing verse in her childhood, being strongly influenced by Dr Walter Hook, Dean of Chichester. Her subsequent religious work was strongly influenced by her contacts with the Oxford Movement, and in particular with John Keble, who edited Hymns for Little Children, one of her anthologies. By the 1840s she was already known as a hymn writer and her

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compositions were soon included in Church of Ireland hymnbooks. She also contributed lyric poems, narrative poems, and translations of French poetry to Dublin University Magazine under various pseudonyms.



Her book *Hymns for Little Children* reached its 69th edition before the close of the 19th century. Some of her hymns, such as "All Things Bright and Beautiful", "There Is a Green Hill Far Away" and the Christmas carol "Once in Royal David's City", are known by Christians the world over, as is her rendering of "Saint Patrick's Breastplate". She issued *Verses for Holy Seasons* (1846), *The Lord of the Forest and His Vassals* (1847) – a children's allegory – and *Hymns for Little Children* (1848).

In Strabane in October 1850 she married the Anglican clergyman William Alexander, afterwards Bishop of Derry and Archbishop of Armagh. Her husband also wrote several books of poetry, of which the best known is *St. Augustine's Holiday and other Poems*. She was six years older than the clergyman, causing great family concern. Her daughter, Eleanor Jane Alexander, was also a poet.

Alexander was involved in charitable work for much of her life. Money from her first publications had helped build the Derry and Raphoe Diocesan Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, which was founded in Strabane in 1846. The profits from Hymns for Little Children were also donated to the school. She was involved with the Derry Home for Fallen Women, and worked to develop a district nurses service. She was an "indefatigable visitor to poor and sick".

Seven hymns penned by Alexander were included in the 1873 issue of the Church of Ireland Hymnal, and eighteen of her works were contained in A Supplement to Hymns Ancient and Modern (1889). They continue to be well-accepted, as nine of her works were contained in both the 1960 and the 1987 editions of the Hymnal. A posthumous collection of her poems was published in 1896 by William Alexander, titled Poems of the late Mrs Alexander.

In 1913, after the death of her husband in 1911, a stained glass window by James Powell and Sons in her memory was installed in the north vestibule of St Columba's Cathedral in Londonderry, financed by public subscription. The three lights of the windows refer to three of her hymns and show corresponding scenes: "Once in Royal David's City", "There Is a Green Hill Far Away", and "The Golden Gates Are Lifted Up". One of her beautiful works was called the Fieldmouse. It is a 4 stanza poem.

Alexander died at the Bishop's Palace in Londonderry and was buried in the City Cemetery. Her husband is buried beside her in a grave which was restored by the Friends of St Columba's Cathedral in 2006.

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An Ulster History Circle commemorative blue plaque was unveiled in her memory on 14th April 1995 at Bishop Street in the city.

People and places



The annual Christmas Jumper Day at the Methodist College, Belfast, has raised over £2600 for the Thorndale Family Centre and School Aid Romania.

News reports

Sanctuary Award for Cork church

Saint Mary's Church in Carrigaline Union of Parishes was recognised as a Church of Sanctuary earlier this month.

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The Sanctuary Award has been presented to four churches representing different denominations across the island of Ireland.



The presentations have fallen within the Christian

observance of the season of Advent under the theme 'No Room at the Inn', highlighting the significant pressures on the system to provide basic housing and safety to those seeking sanctuary in Ireland.

The Revd Elaine Murray, Rector of the Carrigaline Union of Parishes said:

We are delighted that we received Church of Sanctuary status on 11th December.

We really hope that our parish journey will continue under the guidance of the Places of Sanctuary movement and that our efforts will make even a small difference in the lives of people seeking sanctuary in Ireland.

Ecumenical service will mark 50th anniversary of Ballymascanlon talks

An ecumenical joint service of thanksgiving will be held in Saint Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, on 22 January at 3.30 pm with Archbishop Eamon Martin and Rev Harold Good preaching.

The Irish Inter-Church Meeting gathers for an annual conference and the Inter-Church Meeting, made up of Church leaders, meets four times a year. The recent annual conference with participants from various Churches across the island was entitled 'Creatively reconfiguring our post-pandemic understanding of church'.

During their Winter General Meeting in Maynooth, Bishops noted that 2023 will mark the 50th anniversary of the Ballymascanlon talks that saw the Catholic Church develop strong ecumenical relations that have grown over the past fifty years.

Christmas boost for 49 churches from the National Churches Trust

The future of 49 churches, chapels and meeting houses in the UK is safe thanks to £421,000 of funding awarded by the National Churches Trust.

Two churches in Northern Ireland, Ebrington Presbyterian Church on the Waterside of Derry/ Londonderry and



Kilhorne Parish Church, Annalong, County Down, receive grants thanks to the Trust's Treasure Ireland project which is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Pilgrim Trust and the Department for Communities.

One of the Catholic churches receiving a grant is Grade II Listed St Ethelbert in Leominster, in the Archdiocese of Cardiff. Leominster's first post-Reformation Catholic church was in fact a former Wesleyan chapel. But in 1888 Fr Athanasius Rogers, with financial help from a local benefactor, was able to open the present St Ethelbert's Church. Built in Gothic style, it was designed by P P Pugin, the son of the Augustus W Pugin, a well known and ardent advocate of Gothic revivalism.

A sculpture of St Ethelbert was added in 1908, created by William Storr-Barber - a Leominster sculptor who caved several First World War memorials. It also contains a memorial plaque by Eric Gill to Richard and Geoffrey Snead- Cox, local brothers killed in the Great War. As well as celebrating local culture St. Ethelbert's has a rich intangible heritage of welcoming migrant communities.

Early priests Canon James Byrne and Fr Edmond Mottay were Irish and French respectively. The ethos of welcoming migrants extends to this day where the parish includes a large Polish community.

The church receives a £5,000 National Churches Trust Foundation Grant to fund urgent repairs to a half-timber porch. The structure is no longer watertight, allowing rainwater to pool on the decorative Victorian tiled floor creating a slip hazard. This causes anxiety and physical difficulties for the elderly, those with mobility difficulties and parents with pushchairs

Other churches receiving supporting include:

A £30,000 National Churches Trust Cornerstone Grant will pay for urgent repairs to St Mark's church in Shelton, Stoke on Trent. Dubbed 'The Potter's Cathedral', the Grade II Listed church includes precious Victorian Minton tiles manufactured close by and three terracotta reliefs by renowned English ceramic artist George Tinworth.

His Place Community church in the centre of Hastings receives a £27,000 National Churches Trust Cornerstone Grant to help fund urgently needed tower repairs. The

Grade II Listed building, designed in 1885, features a superb horseshoe gallery which seats 700 people and retains many of its original features.

Crawshawbooth Quaker Meeting House in Lancashire benefits from a £10,000 National Churches Trust Cornerstone Grant to help fund new accessible toilets and a kitchen to enable wider use by the local community and visitors. Built in the early 18th century, much of the interior of the Meeting House survives, providing insights into the way space was used for worship by Quakers in the past.

St Mary's Church Room, in Cobham, Kent, a rare surviving example of a 'Tin Tabernacle' receives a £15,000 National Churches Trust Cornerstone Grant to upgrade the interior and provide new community facilities. This 'Tin Tabernacle' was produced in kit form by Norwich based Boulton & Paul in 1889 and served as the mission hall for St Mary Magdalene church in Cobham. Dating from the 1290s, Grade II* Listed St Peter and Paul in Wincanton, Somerset, has suffered from severe water damage in recent years. The church receives a £5,000 National Churches Trust Cornerstone Grant and also a £10,000 Wolfson Fabric Repair Grant from the Wolfson Foundation.

The grants are made possible thanks to NCT friends and supporters including the Pilgrim Trust. Thanks to a partnership with the Wolfson Foundation, support of £137,000 for 15 churches is provided by Wolfson Fabric Repair Grants which support repair work at Listed churches in the UK.

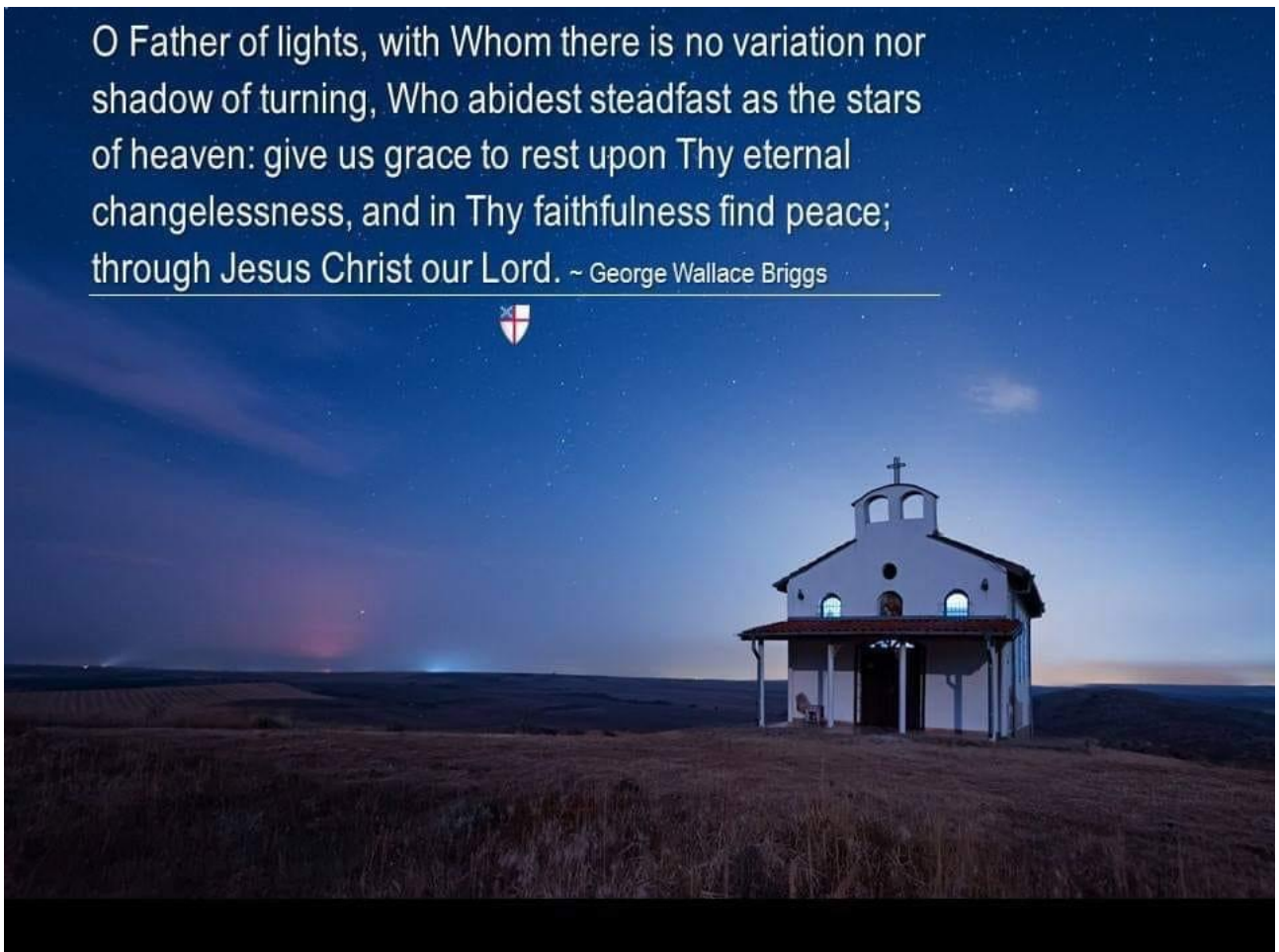
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Paul Ramsbottom, chief executive of the Wolfson Foundation said:

"As well as being places of worship and buildings of beauty, churches sit at the heart of the community. In many ways they stand between the past and present. We are thrilled to continue our partnership with the National Churches Trust to support the preservation of these significant, much-loved historic buildings across the UK.

Broadcaster and journalist Huw Edwards, our Vice President, said: "The latest funding from the National Churches Trust is a tremendous boost to 49 of the UK's places of worship. Coming just in time for Christmas, the grants awarded will help fund urgent repairs and installing modern community facilities. This will safeguard unique

O Father of lights, with Whom there is no variation nor shadow of turning, Who abidest steadfast as the stars of heaven: give us grace to rest upon Thy eternal changelessness, and in Thy faithfulness find peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. ~ George Wallace Briggs



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local heritage and keep churches open and in use for the benefit of local people.

"The National Churches Trust helps hundreds of historic churches each year and with the support of local people keeps them thriving today, and tomorrow."

For more information about the National Churches Trust visit: www.nationalchurchestrust.org

The vulnerable Saviour - The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's. 2022 Christmas Message

Visit to Hungary and Ukraine - In March 2022 following the Russian invasion of Ukraine the previous month, PCI's Moderator at the time, Dr David Bruce, launched a special appeal for Ukraine which subsequently raised over £1.3 million for the relief effort. The aid was distributed equally between PCI's relief and development partners Christian Aid (Ireland) and Tearfund, and also to one of PCI's partner churches, the Reformed Church in Hungary and its relief and development wing, Hungarian Reformed Church Aid.

Dr Kirkpatrick and his wife Joan travelled to central Europe in October to see the ongoing work of the Reformed Church in Hungary as it continued to support Ukrainian refugees in Hungary. They also crossed the border into Transcarpathia, a region of western Ukraine and the city of Berehove, spending time with the leadership of the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia and members on the ground, who were

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caring for the thousands of Internally Displaced People fleeing the conflict further east.

The Moderator writes - Approaching the Ukrainian border from Hungary in October was quite stressful, especially when your passport is taken and you are left in a kind of no man's land. Vulnerability is what you feel.



That same feeling happened at various times - when the air raid siren went off, or you were stopped at a checkpoint –

occasions that certainly take you out of our comfort zone. At the time there was a sense of inner peace, as I knew that my life was in the hands of the kindest and most caring Heavenly Father. As long as I remember this, all is well and I'm happy to place myself in such situations for the good of others when I consider it to be His will.

However, the most vulnerable people are those who have little power to change anything, like the adults and children I met in Transcarpathia, western Ukraine. In such situations, as I experienced, there is a real feeling of helplessness and even anger, especially at those faceless people who from some remote command centre plotted the trajectory of the missiles that landed elsewhere in the country, triggering the sirens that sent us to the shelter.

For different reasons, many people on this island will have been feeling vulnerable this year, especially due to the cost of living crisis. It was into the place of vulnerability that Jesus came that first Christmas. He came as a child, born to an oppressed people and exposed to the brutality of King Herod, causing His family to flee for their lives becoming refugees in Egypt. Throughout His life, Jesus often placed himself in such vulnerable situations. One enabling reason was the sense of complete confidence in His Father, embracing God's will even when it meant the ultimate in vulnerability - the Crucifixion – exposing Himself to death on the Cross and the perfect justice and judgment for our sin.

In so doing Jesus achieved so much. He was able to win for anyone who will humbly trust Him, complete forgiveness. He truly did achieve what Isaiah declared about him "...to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives

and release from darkness for the prisoners...” (Isaiah 61:1) This means he understands the vulnerable and will fight for “the widow and orphan” (James 1:27). Becoming vulnerable, Jesus wins for us the capacity to embrace vulnerability too, stepping out and opening up our lives.

If we want to discover real love, we have to be vulnerable. If we try to achieve a meaningful peace with one or many, we have to become vulnerable. If we really want to grow in any area of our lives, at Christmas or at any time, we have to become open-handed and open-hearted. We should have the courage to be vulnerable and rediscover the Covid kindness that was so evident in the early days of the pandemic.

Because of all that Jesus has won for us, we can put ourselves out there. Unless and until we are willing to become vulnerable to God, we close off every possibility of knowing Him. Past hurts and disappointments can make us suspicious of his love and grace. In my earlier life I experienced just this very thing. Somehow, that did not prevent God from persisting to draw me out, to discover what Mr Beaver found in CS Lewis’ classic, ‘The Lion Witch and Wardrobe.’

Asking about Aslan, the great lion - Lewis’ powerful metaphor for Christ – the children are told, “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver...Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King...’ This is the way to experience that life need not always be winter and never Christmas.

Rt Rev Dr John Kirkpatrick. Moderator
Presbyterian Church in Ireland

Joint Christmas Message from the Archbishops of Armagh

And of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:16)

A highlight of the Christmas season is the solemn reading from the prologue of John’s Gospel with its memorable opening: “In the beginning was the Word ...”

Commenting recently on John’s Gospel, the Irish scholar, David Ford, describes it as “the gospel of abundance” because it overflows with the “fullness” of God’s love for his creation – “grace upon grace”.

The Scripture readings at Christmas time leave us in no doubt that this Good News of abundance is God’s ‘Yes’ to the world he made, the climax of God’s plan for the world, the keeping of promises made by God down the centuries.

Of course riches and abundance will mean different things to different people. In the Ireland of today many of us think of those words in relation to material comfort – for most of us, after all, even the spiritual life requires a degree of material security to be sustainable. The problem comes when this one aspect of abundance overwhelms all others; a belief that the price of everything becomes the value of everything, which in turn hardens into an ideology of maximising consumer satisfaction which cannot do justice to the richness of personal life.



The current public understanding of abundance is incapable of healing the divisions in our society. Society cannot be truly democratic without a strong sense of solidarity and community – something which can often be absent today. When seeking the nomination of the Democratic Party to run for President, the late Robert Francis Kennedy once said:

“The Gross National Product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages ... it measures ... neither our wisdom nor our compassion ... it measures everything, in short, except that which makes our lives worthwhile”.

The Word who became flesh during the reign of the Emperor Octavian, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria, addressed himself to rulers as well as to individuals. His whole life witnessed to fundamental truths – that authority is

the exercise of power which is morally justified; and, political life (although it takes very different forms in different ages) is not the servant of any economic or national ideology, but the pursuit of the common good of all people. The unfolding tragedy of what is happening in Ukraine is perhaps a result of ignoring these fundamentals.

We live in an age which has been described as one of “surveillance capitalism”. It is an age of algorithms and atomisation; a global system of behaviour modification which can threaten human nature itself. The coming of the ‘Word made flesh’ drags us back to both the primacy of persons and of their solidarity. The Light that came into the world at Christmas time enlightens every person who has been born or ever will be. Jesus Christ was the first person in the whole of history to have conceived of humankind as a unity, whose good he came to secure and who are secure in him.

But the manner in which he came into the world is crucial to his vocation and ours. As Phillips Brooks’ Christmas carol puts it, “how silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given”. He was born into an obscure Province and into a people despised by many. He avoided all ties of high office or public position. He was an austere man – mistaken by some for the stern old prophet Elijah – yet he had a heart to which children were instinctively drawn. We fear becoming poor; he dreaded that any person should be rich. Yet he had within himself all the riches of the Father’s goodness, enough for the whole world of every age and more besides.

For “... of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16).

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The Most Revd John McDowell is the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland.

The Most Revd Eamon Martin is the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland.

Archbishop of Canterbury shares thoughts on rift between the Sussex's and the Royal Family

Most Rev Justin Welby believes reconciliation will happen at the “right time” between the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and the royal family.

The 66-year-old church leader – who officiated the Sussex's wedding in 2018 - was asked his opinion on the matter following the release of the last episodes of Harry and Meghan's Netflix docuseries.

Speaking on BBC's Sundays with Laura Kuenssberg, Archbishop Justin said: "I can't really comment on it because I married them and there's sort of pastoral confidentiality.

"There's always a way forward, but it has to be at the right time.

"And, as a Christian, I live in the belief that forgiveness comes from God through Jesus Christ and that God, particularly at this time of the year, God breaks into the world to open the way to forgiveness through the Christ channel.

"But the way we welcome that opportunity is different for everyone. And there has to be a right time," he added.

Poem for today

Christmas Bells by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along
The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime,
A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

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It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men."

Speaking to the soul – Christmas series

Short reading and a prayer - daily on this site

Church News Ireland

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