

*Wednesday 28 December*

‘A cold coming they had of it,’ is the chilly start to T S Eliot’s poem, *the Journey of the Magi*. A cold coming I had of it too. The weather forecast had been dire: sub-zero temperatures, heavy snowfall, winds gusting in from the Arctic, all conspiring against my Holy Innocents’ Day Eucharist at East Moors, five miles up the bleak North York Moors. I made the lonely journey by bicycle, with chalice and paten, wine and bread and all other necessary ingredients for a communion packed into my rucksack.

Usually cycling up 1:3 hills dispels the cold, but not today: the chill bitterness of the journey was unrelenting. The streams which normally tumbled down the hillsides had become ice and crept across the road like mini-glaciers. In the middle of the lane lay a rabbit, as stiff as a board. Her body was perfect – she hadn’t been hit by traffic or attacked by a bird of prey, I guess the cold had simply got to her and her arteries had frozen solid. I stopped and moved her body to the verge, kicking the cold soil from a rock-like molehill to cover her with earth: it seemed a more tender funeral than being mashed by the wheels of a passing car.

Not that there were any passing cars. I skated over the ford and arrived at the little church so celebrated by Betjeman, and set up for the service, wondering if anyone else at all was going to come. One person did, explaining that she had watched me descend the slipperiest Cow House Bank before she had decided it was safe for her to follow in her four-by-four. Another family joined our celebration half way through, and so boosted the *sursum corda* (It can be so disheartening when you say ‘The Lord be with you,’ and no one replies!), our breath condensing before us like clouds of incense. When it came to the administration, I lifted the tiny chalice to my lips, but no wine came out. Even the alcohol had turned to gel in these polar temperatures, so I cupped my hand around the frozen grail to thaw out God, a priestly role if ever there was one.

Why didn’t I cancel the service? Because I had promised a mother whose son had tragically died on that day two years earlier that I would pray for him out here, and I could hardly let her down, with a cheery, ‘So sorry, it was a bit icy, so we called it off.’ I’m never too happy about letting God down either: ‘Thanks God for struggling to Bethlehem and Calvary and all stops in between, but it was a bit slippery underfoot today, so Holy Communion was scrapped.’

On the cycle ride home I huffed and puffed up Cow House Bank. A deer scrambled down the hill, followed closely by her fawn and crossed the road in front of me. It seemed almost as if they nodded to me before they disappeared once again into the dark forest, making it a morning for lost children and found children.

*David Wilbourne © Helmsley Chronicles 2012*