

# There's plenty of room at inn, even in poorest areas

**C**HRISTMAS is an important time to think about how we treat vulnerable strangers, when they come to us seeking shelter. I suppose the whole Christmas story underpins something I learned while working with children in care – that you can tell a lot about people by the way they respond to the least powerful, the most needy, often to children and young people in distress.

Last Monday, the man who's now our newly-elected Prime Minister came to the North East, to pass on his message that "migrants had been able to treat the UK as if it's part of their own country" for too long.

That same afternoon, I sat in a meeting being told that the 12 local authorities in the North East are between them looking after 40 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. This is by far the lowest rate in England, the next lowest number in any region is 240.

I grew up in a small working-class community in Northumberland. Reinforced every Christmas and New Year, I learned at first-hand how people pull together in hard times and look after each other.

Times have changed, the pits, the miners' welfares have now gone, but I still regard such places as the warmest, most caring communities in the world. In fact, when I hear from people, newly arrived to seek asylum, that they feel safe here, that people are friendly and kind, I know that the really important things haven't changed.

So why do the leaders of 12 local authorities, elected by us, paid for by us imagine that it's acceptable to decide, on our behalf, that there's no welcome for maybe 20 more needy children in each council area?

No councillor has discussed this fundamentally important decision with me. I have seen no minutes or reports of any meetings, I don't think there's been anything in this newspaper, or any other, or on TV. Yet now the rest of the country, indeed the rest of the world is left to infer that the relatively poor, largely white, mainly working-class communities of North East England are unwelcoming to children. Perhaps even "stupid" or "racist".

You could see this sort of attitude

on display in the early hours of Friday morning. Whole communities, the whole North East region, being patronised by well-heeled commentators, incredulous on our behalf that places which are so much worse off than southern England, should turn to a Conservative Party so beloved in Tunbridge Wells.

For better or worse we have a Conservative government with a democratic mandate to "get Brexit done", in power for the next five years. Whether we hope for better, or fear the worst, we are facing monumental change and it is imperative that we hold elected representatives to account.

The argument about Brexit is over; what we can all surely agree upon is that North East communities must get a fair share of opportunities and be protected from harm. We all need to benefit from "50,000 extra nurses and 50 million more GP appointments, 20,000 more police, millions more invested each week in science, schools, apprenticeships and infrastructure".

Unfortunately, while our returning officers vie with each other for the meaningless accolade of fastest election count there is hardly any



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Hilton Dawson



effective democracy here. Our newly-elected representatives are turning up in Parliament this week, but none of the people who actually voted for them will have much clue about what they will be doing.

The reporting of Parliament is a national disgrace. There is barely any regional, let alone local scrutiny of what our MPs are doing, there are no public meetings to discuss important issues with them, too often any feedback is worthless propaganda. Above all, we don't have an active, inquiring citizenry, perhaps because we have absolutely no adult education in how systems work, in people's rights and responsibilities within a properly functioning democracy.

We need much more informative and challenging regional media. We should be able to look to local government and to an elected mayor to model accountability, openness and good communication.

Outside of party politics we require first-class education, geared towards adults who want to understand what's happening at a time of fundamental change. People need some tools to engage more effectively than simply turning up to vote once in a while, then arguing on social media the rest of the time.

Early next year, the North East Party are aiming to take these issues out across Northumberland.

Coming up to Christmas though, here's a good debate to get going over the turkey. However we "get Brexit done" we need more immigration to staff revitalised public services for our ageing population. Immigration is a good thing, it brings able people to our communities and young people who are avid for education to our schools. In turn they are supported by parents who are keenly determined that their children should get on and model aspirational behaviour to others.

All the best for Christmas. Actually, there is plenty of room at the Inn.

# We're individuals and every single one of us matters

Nick Megoran



**H**AVE you seen any Christmas movies yet? Hallmark Channel showed its first Christmas film this year in July, and a recent article claimed that watching them all year round is good for your mental health.

But if like me you will, on principle, only watch It's a Wonderful Life or Nativity during the Christmas holidays, your brief viewing window means you have to choose carefully. Do you go for venerable masterpieces like Miracle on 34th Street, or more modern classics like Elf?

My personal favourite is the 2011 cartoon Arthur Christmas. It tops my poll because it illustrates some profound things about the original Christmas story – the birth of Jesus – and its relevance to life in Britain.

In Arthur Christmas, Santa's annual Christmas run has been turned into a high-tech military-style "Operation Santa Klaus" by his ambitious elder son, Steve. It opens with camouflage-clad special forces-style elves landing on roofs with grappling irons.

Using high-tech gadgets to break into homes without having to go down chimneys, they deposit appropriate gifts at breakneck speed. It's all very slick, overseen by Steve using his "HoHo3000" handheld device. No room here for sleighs, mince pies or Christmas spirit.

However, after Steve declares "Mission Accomplished" it turns out that one child, Gwen Hines, has been overlooked. Steve isn't bothered, saying "We'll get child 47785BXX a present within the window of Christmas."

But Steve's hapless younger brother, Arthur, can't accept this. He secretly resurrects Santa's rickety old-fashioned sleigh and brings the reindeers out of retirement for a desperate journey around the world to track down Gwen and deliver her present before Christmas morning.

Arthur Christmas is a great film: kids will love the comic magic, and adults smile at the wry satire of heartless bosses obsessed with 'efficiency'. But on a deeper level it illustrates two important aspects of the Christmas story. The first is that

everyone matters to God. For Steve, Gwen is just a number – "a margin of error of 0.0000000001514834" – who is not worth bothering about. For Arthur, she is not "47785BXX," but Gwen.

In our workplaces, numbers often matter more than people. Workers are valued by how far they have hit their performance targets, schools by their Ofsted scores, kids by their exam results.

In contrast, the Christmas message is that everyone is so important to God that he came into the world as a baby in Bethlehem. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son" writes Saint John in the Bible.

Christmas is a reminder that however much we've failed to live up to all that society expects of us, God loves us unconditionally. No one is ever a 'margin of error'.

The second way that Arthur Christmas highlights the nativity story is that God went to great lengths to show us his love. "Who cares about one child?" asks Steve, dismissively. But for Arthur, Gwen matters so much that he'll bust a gut to ensure she gets her present.

On his journey from the North Pole to her home in Cornwall, Arthur gets stranded in Cuba, cast adrift in the Atlantic, chased by lions in the Serengeti, and shot at by a US drone.

Likewise, the Christmas story tells us that God made the infinitely long journey from heaven to Earth. He grew up as one of us, dying at Easter on the cross to rescue humanity; all because human beings are worth it.

Many of us feel we don't matter. We don't look right on social media. We haven't got the grades our parents expect. We've failed to hit the targets our bosses demand. We've not achieved the smug lifestyle image portrayed in the TV Christmas adverts.

The Christmas story tells us that none of this really matters, because all of us are equally valuable to God. That's the most liberating thing we can be told. And it's why I, for one, am looking forward to Christmas movies.

■ Nick Megoran is Professor of Political Geography at Newcastle University and Minister of Wallsend Baptist Church