

Diary of a retired parson: Zoom Zoom Zoom

Jonathan Copus reflects on the joys and gin-traps of virtual worship

During lockdown, Mrs C and I started attending the church I belonged to as an ordinand in the late sixties: St John's, Waterloo. Not, of course, by driving over 200 miles – that would have been against the spirit of the Government's guidelines – but as one of the little rectangles on a laptop.

Virtual Eucharists are a beautiful blessing but a curious beast, not without their pitfalls. Leaving everyone's sound unmuted can lead to hitherto undiscovered passages in Acts such as: 'Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples and said, "Is that somebody at the door, dear?"'



Giant theological issues arose which dwarfed trifles about angels on a pin head. Is the efficacy of an Absolution affected by the latency of 4G broadband? And what – *O magnum mysterium!* – about a pre-recorded Blessing?

Of course, the only communicants were the President and whoever else was in her kitchen. But we all joined in the responses and sang the hymns with silent gusto. Once we were sent into 'breakout rooms' – small groups where we could give the sermon marks out of ten. Sorry, discuss What It Meant For Us. That's one thing we might usefully import into 'live' services (especially the marks out of ten).

Worship by Zoom also highlighted the absurd Anglican obsession with posture. 'Can I invite you to stand for the Gospel?' resulted in some people sensibly moving back from the lens, but mostly a screenful of ketchup-stained trousers and even a short skirt which would have been described in a *Carry On* film as 'just about the right thighs'.

Let's not knock ceremonial: many people find its grace and fluidity a valuable spiritual vehicle. As a teenager, I could've told you exactly when the Subdeacon should genuflect and ascend to the Predella during Pontifical High Mass at the Throne by a Greater Prelate. But when we moved to Waterloo, with its burgeoning Cardboard City, the distinction between a Moderate Bow and a Profound one seemed to lose some of its significance.

That reminds me of the Anglo-Catholic woman who dragged her husband along for a rare appearance at church. Throughout the service she spat commands at him: 'Sit down! Stand up! Bow! Cross yourself!'

Kneeling in prayer, she hissed behind her hands: 'Are your flies undone?'

'N-no,' stammered the terrified man. 'Should they be?'