

LORDS DIARY

While Christmas is a time of celebration, **Lord Alton** reflects on the plight of Christians under assault in Syria and the suffering of the homeless in the UK

Thursday 22 December

Recess begins with a sombre warning from the Prince of Wales that Christians are being “driven en masse out of lands described in the Bible...such evil persecution is beyond all belief”. The prince refers to Father Ziad, a Syrian priest who spoke at Westminster on Red Wednesday – when Mr Speaker and the Lord Speaker lit the façade of the palace red, to commemorate the persecuted. Fr Ziad has just telephoned, describing a narrow escape after his Aleppo home was bombed.

Saturday 24 December

Since 1928, from King’s College Chapel in Cambridge, the BBC have broadcast a Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols and, each year since 1983, a new carol has been commissioned. Based on a medieval text, this year’s tender composition articulates the voice of Jesus in dialogue with his

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mother. *The Endernight* is composed by the Crossbench peer, Michael Berkeley – son of the composer Sir Lennox Berkeley and godson of Benjamin Britten. Modestly describing *The Endernight* – to those of us who share an office with him – as “an upbeat lullaby” it’s much more than that: a wonderful piece of music shedding light into the darkness of men’s deeds.

On to Midnight Mass in Lancashire, where I chair a small heritage charity, and home to the original manuscript of *Adeste Fideles* (1751) (“O Come, All Ye Faithful”).

Sunday 25 December

Christmas Service with the family,

followed by Goosnargh goose, the Queen and presents. This is no time for Scrooge or the Christmas-abolishing Puritans: Christmas should be celebrated.

Ken (Lord) Baker once gave me a copy of his lovely anthology of poems by GK Chesterton who said that ‘Christmas is built upon a beautiful and intentional paradox; that the birth of the homeless should be celebrated in every home.’



But not everyone is so lucky. Christmas can be a cruel time, especially for homeless people. The late MP Iain Macleod understood that, and in 1967 he and his formidable wife, Eve (later, Baroness Macleod of Borve), founded Crisis at Christmas.

In 1979, as a new MP, Eve asked me to become a trustee and I once spent an eye-opening Christmas at the Crisis shelter. I remain a Vice President. Nowadays, Crisis works 365 days of the year. In 2016 they saw a 30% increase in rough sleeping. Spare them a thought this day.

Wednesday 28 December

Among the Christmas messages is one from Jean-Clément Jeanbart, Archbishop of Aleppo, who spoke at Westminster last year. Describing the plight of the city’s refugees as a “devastating tempest which has hit our country” he is encouraged by today’s announcement by Turkey of a cease fire brokered with Russia. Syrian refugees

loomed large in Tim Montgomerie’s excellent Radio 4 programme on the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents.

Saturday 31 December

The carol, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” reminds us that Christmastide continues until Epiphany. It was used by Catholics during penal times to conceal hidden messages. So the Ten Lords a Leaping does not refer to their Lordships’ House – but to the ten commandments, while the three French hens were faith, hope and love.

No concealed messages in the Prime Minister’s 2017 New Year exhortation: Teresa May told us to overcome the divisions “laid bare” by the referendum. At Coventry, Justin Welby, recalling the wartime destruction of the cathedral, pointed to it as a sign of reconciliation and healing.

Sunday 1 January

What will Europe look like at the end of 2017 – which will see general or presidential elections in six EU countries? On Radio 4 Jeremy Irons is reading TS.Eliot’s *The Waste Land* written about a Europe utterly broken by the First World War. Later, we hear Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and Rory Stewart MP explains how he committed it to memory while walking across Afghanistan. Encouragingly, it concludes with the words of the Norwich mystic, Mother Julian, that “all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well”. Eliot also reflects that “last year’s words belong to last year’s language and next year’s words await another voice”. We’ll see. 🇬🇧



Lord Alton of Liverpool is a Crossbench peer