

Ann Widdecombe



AS millennium fever increases, the stories get dafter. This is a Christian festival with everyone afraid to admit it.

I shall avoid the Dome like the plague and as for the Wheel, I can hardly bear to look at it, let alone go on it. If you are a Londoner and want to do other things on millennium eve, your life will be made a misery with major roads and bridges closed from 3pm. All I want to do is take my elderly mother to Mass at Westminster Cathedral, a journey of less than two miles, but I might as well plan a trip to the North Pole.

To escape from the hell of millennium babble I turned my thoughts towards Heaven and went to Waterstones in Piccadilly to auction dozens of individual signatures and photographs culled from entries in Father Michael Seed's book *Heaven*. Scores of personalities from around the world had contributed their thoughts on what

Heaven would be like, for a book designed to raise money for the late Cardinal Hume's charity for the homeless. The event raised £7,000 and the cast was a veritable galaxy of saints and sinners.

Mother Teresa was the star attraction at £700 with Sean Connery second at £500, while at the event itself James Hewitt rubbed shoulders with the saintly Lord Longford (£90). My own contribution was knocked down at a modest £200 as was John Major's. I started the bidding for Tony Blair at two pence and for William Hague at £1,000 but otherwise showed no preferences as I acted, in as ham a fashion as possible, the role of the Sotheby's auctioneer. I am not expecting a job offer in the post.

As I pondered the contributors' names — Gielgud, Connery, Dora Bryan to name but a few — I reflected on the way the Church has turned to showbiz to raise money for its own causes.

This week showbiz has done more than raise money: it is one of the most effective means of communicating the true message of the millennium as Cliff Richard's rendering of the Lord's Prayer continues to top the charts.

Not long ago a survey showed that most people could no longer say the Lord's Prayer without a text of it in front of them. Thanks to

Cliff, everyone will soon know every word of it. It is an eloquent comment on Britain today that it takes a pop star to succeed where the bishops have failed.

MEANWHILE, at the Reform Club in Pall Mall, a group of religious leaders from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu faiths had gathered to pro-

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The Chief Rabbi was present, as was the Bishop of London. Cardinal Daly was on a phone link. The campaign is supported by a large number of public figures from both secular and religious life. David Blunkett sent a message praising what it has done in schools.

It is hard to imagine a more important religious event taking place that day, yet only one religious correspondent turned up from the national press. The Deity was doubtless most flattered. Perhaps we should have had some showbiz.

LITERATURE is turning to the celebrity world as well with the choice of Jerry Hall and Imogen Stubbs as two of the judges for the Whitbread Prize. There has been the usual outcry about dumbing down because so great is the intellectual snobbery of the literary establishment that it can not imagine anyone having a brain and appealing to millions of ordinary people at the same time. Yet Stubbs

has a double first from Oxford — in English. Twenty five years after the passing of the Equal Opportunities Act it is apparently still impossible to imagine a pretty woman being clever or well informed. I, too, am a judge and I look forward to lively discussions with Jerry Hall.

This week I found myself surrounded by girls who were pretty and formidably clever when I went to speak at the Francis Holland School. After the event, a group of them gathered in the headmistress's study to talk to me.

As we ran out of chairs we sat on the floor, including the head, and dissected everything from Peter Mandelson's return to Government to the British press.

What gave me hope was that one or two of the girls wanted to enter politics. I hope they stick to the ambition because one or two of the calibre will do more for the House of Commons than any amount of positive discrimination.

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A Jewish story: Two friends have had a row, and for ten years they haven't spoken to one another. One night they are in the synagogue as the Day of Atonement is about to begin. The rabbi goes over to each in turn and tells them that the holiest moment in the year is about to arrive. The time has come for them to apologise to one another and make up.

Life, he says, is too short to bear a grudge. They agree, walk over to one another and shake hands. One says to the other, "I wish you all that you wish me." The second turns to the rabbi and says, "You see — again he's starting with me!"

Jokes help us overcome our fears — in this case the fear that in making up, our apology will be rebuffed and we will have put ourselves in the wrong for no good end. In most cases it isn't so. The opposite is usually the case.

Each year, at the time of the Jewish New Year, I explain to people that atonement is not just saying sorry to God. It is saying sorry to the

Saying "sorry" can make a world of difference

people we have hurt and making amends for the hurt we have caused. Not a year passes without someone telling me, days later, how they have done so and how much better it has made their lives. There are few things more liberating than putting right a wrong we have done or mending a relationship that has been broken.

Recently, together with the broadcaster Martyn Lewis, the Bishop of London, politicians, sportsmen and leaders of the Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist communities, I took part in the launch of an initiative called the Clean Slate Campaign. The idea behind it is gloriously simple:

Credo

Jonathan Sacks



begin the new millennium by putting right the things you feel bad about, so that you start a new age with a clear conscience.

To move on to the future we have to let go of the past, and to do this we have to make amends. Otherwise we carry the past with us as a lingering

wound. It was fascinating to hear the stories of those who have already decided to wipe the slate clean. One had overcome a long family estrangement. Another had anonymously given back money to shops from which he had stolen. A third, having lost his temper with a council official, brought her a box of chocolates the next day.

And to remind us that this process can have larger consequences, Cardinal Cahal Davy, the former Archbishop of Armagh, came on the line from Northern Ireland and spoke movingly of the need for repentance, forgiveness and

reconciliation if that region's troubles are to be overcome. So congratulations to Edward Peters who first conceived the idea of the campaign. The world is full of pain, and the most tragic is the pain we could so easily end with the simple words: "I was wrong. I am sorry. Forgive me." It takes a special kind of courage to apologise, but the rewards are great.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, one of the great rabbis of the 19th century, used to say: "When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I tried, but the world didn't change. So I decided to change my town, but my town didn't change. Then I resolved to change my family, but my family didn't change. Then I realised — first I have to change myself."

When enough people decide to change themselves, we begin to change the world. It is never too late to mend what we have injured — and never too soon either.

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