

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY 2nd January 2017

Good Morning

Last night fireworks lit up the vast skyscape over the Humber Estuary as Hull, the new City of Culture, rivalled the spectacular display over London on New Year's Eve. Each city in this Brexit era declaring itself open to the rest of the world.

When I was Hull's bishop twenty years ago it was said that Hull was the safest place in the world to say to anyone, 'Do call when you're passing.'

It's remoteness on the east coast is captured by a Philip Larkin poem about journeying north to Hull,

"Swerving to solitude" that leads "to the surprise of a large town."

That surprise was magnified for many people by the decision to make Hull the UK's City of Culture. But I remember, when bishop of Liverpool, people being equally sceptical when Liverpool became European Capital of Culture in 2008. There was a lot of prejudice about the north based on some stereotypes as rusty as an old mill.

Of course, it raises the question as to what culture is. And it was another poet who suggested that culture could be defined quite simply as those things that make life worth living.

It's said that in Liverpool during its own culture year, when many stunning events brought people out on to the streets, there was a drop in the number of prescriptions for anti-depressants.

Huge numbers came north, perceptions were changed and the economy boosted.

And the common reaction of most visitors? Surprise.

Surprised by the architecture and entertained by the culture of northern souls.

The surprising choice of these two cities of the North as celebrated centres of culture has a resonance with the Nativity which is full of unexpected elements. Sophisticated southerners questioned whether anything good, let alone the saviour of the world, could come out of the rustic northern town of Nazareth.

In fact the New Testament goes further and claims that God deliberately chooses what's 'low and despised' to further his purposes. It seems he finds delight in taking the world by surprise!

As we stand on the threshold of a new and uncertain year it's an attitude worth pondering. Most of us have parts of our life that we don't value, or even despise. Learning to embrace them could turn them into the very things that make our life worth living.

If that fails, then take to the road and travel north, or if in you're in York, south and east.

To a large town, now a city called Hull.

The Right Reverend James Jones