

Good King Wenceslas makes contact

Good King Wenceslas looked out. 'It's snowing again,' he commented to his page, 'getting quite thick too.' The page joined him at the window. 'Yes,' he said, 'deep and crisp and even, you might say.' 'You might,' said the king, 'sounds a bit too poetic for me. More to the point, will it stop the archbishop getting here?' 'He'll get here alright,' said his page, 'he'll bring his archepiscopal crozier. It melts the snow where he's going to tread.' 'Thought it was only myself who could do that,' said the king, 'or has he got some divine dispensation too?' 'No,' replied the page, 'but he has got a crozier with a heated end. You know how gadget mad he is.' 'Indeed yes,' said the king, 'and it's about another of his gadgets that he's asked to see me. Some security issue with the prayer cards I believe. I suppose you had to expect some glitches. The system was introduced so quickly, and all those terminals fitted in the churches.'

'Well,' said the page, 'apparently the cards are this year's most wanted Christmas present, and I am of course most grateful for the one you gave me at this Yule-time sire, though I think I was not the only recipient of your royal bounty.' 'Well no,' admitted the king, 'but yours is a limited edition: the archbishop and I agreed there would be just forty of the royal sovereign prayer cards— a good biblical number don't you think — for selected recipients. And they have been preloaded with a generous number of prayers.' 'Prayers for your royal majesty,' pointed out the page. 'Indeed,' said the king, 'but for the monarch as head of state rather than in a personal capacity.' The page bowed slightly, then continued, 'If I may make so bold sire, when I have tapped away my prayer account, can I load it with prayers for any topic, or just those for your grace?' 'Oh, any topic,' replied the king, 'I insisted on that. There's forty different topics to choose from at the ATM recharging points, and of course you can create your own bespoke prayers too. But I have to point out that the cost of your new prayers will be met from your bank account not mine.'

'Naturally,' said the page, 'and what an imaginative way of collecting money by the church!' 'And saving you time too,' said the king. 'I understand the services are on average four and a half minutes shorter. There's no need for intercessions any more, you just tap your card on the terminal as you go in, and now it's so convenient to pray without going to church — tap the card at any ATM, or any bus, and in most shops too. Everyone's doing it, I believe.' 'Indeed,' agreed the page, 'and the archbishop's slogans, they were winners weren't they: 'contact God contactlessly', 'you don't need a pin to pray' and 'we're tapping our way to God'.' 'Well he was a marketing executive before he joined the church,' said the king, 'but there are some problems I believe, hence his visit today.'

As if on cue the palace doorbell rang, and the page was soon ushering in the archbishop. 'May I take your crozier your grace?' asked the page solicitously, 'and should I recharge it?' 'Discretely please,' said the archbishop, 'a little bit of the miraculous matters for the PR!'

'Well do sit down archbishop,' said the king, 'and what brings you here pray?' 'Precisely,' replied the archbishop, 'it is how we pray and for whom we pray that we need to consider.' 'Oh,' the King almost sounded disappointed, 'I thought there was a security problem, your system being hacked perhaps, personal prayer data stolen.' 'Heaven forbid!' exclaimed the prelate, 'our system is protected by encryption as well as prayer. But it is to keep our security secure that I have come to personally deliver to you a royal password, once I can find the paper I wrote it down on.' He fumbled in his robes for a bit before producing a small slip of paper. 'We introduced an app that

enables you to receive a message every time someone prays for you, and now the system allows us to monitor when people pray, where people pray, and what they pray about. We agreed (as I'm sure your majesty will recall) that as head of the church you should be able to access this information.' 'Ah yes, of course,' said the king, 'and this password enables me to do that?' 'Exactly so,' replied the archbishop, 'so if your majesty would graciously switch on his laptop, and then enter this address, and click here, scroll down and click here, then enter this password, and click here and enter this password, and if you look at the screen you will see how we can collect and summarise data. So for example, we can see at a glance what or whom people are praying for, thus, and if we click here we can produce a table that shows the most popular prayer subjects.' 'That's most enlightening,' said the king, 'now just a moment, these are the top twenty topics...' 'Out of forty, yes,' explained the archbishop, 'but I don't see the king, or the monarchy in this top twenty!' 'I think if you go to the next page sire you will find...' - 'That I am number 26,' said the king, 'that's not an overwhelming endorsement of my kingship is it!' He thought for a moment, 'Before this was introduced, I was prayed for in all the churches as part of the liturgy, so what's happening now?' 'The church has been modernising its liturgy to integrate advances in technology.' replied the archbishop, 'and prayer cards enable a more embracing voice to be heard in prayer and....' 'You said you can show me where prayers are being said, so can we look at churches and see how many prayers are being said for me?' 'Yes we can do that' – the archbishop tapped some keys and a new display appeared – 'and in order please: most at the top, least at the bottom.' 'As your majesty wishes,' the archbishop's fingers tapped away. 'Now look,' said the king, 'there's some good churches here at the top, now let's go down to the bottom and what's this, there's one church where no-one has prayed for me at all during the how long is it?' – 'nine weeks'... 'nine weeks that this has been running, church 2495, which one's that?' 'Emm let's see,' said the archbishop, 'it's yes, the church of St Stephen, and it's his Saint's day today there's irony for you!'

'Forget irony', said the King, 'this church is duty bound to pray for their monarch and they are not doing so. In my ancestor's days we would have had the priest up for treason, and the churchwardens too!' 'And I would be claiming benefit of clergy on their behalf,' replied the archbishop, 'well, for the priest at any rate, but fortunately we live in more enlightened times sire, and your majesty should also take into account your laws on data protection and human rights. It might not look too good if the press got to hear you were snooping on people's prayers. Nevertheless I shall ensure the archdeacon visits for a discrete word.' 'Yes do that,' said the king, 'and make sure it's one of your rottweiler archdeacons, not the meek and mild variety.' 'I'm not sure they ever came as meek and mild,' sighed the archbishop.

Therefore Christian men be sure
Phones or pads possessing,
The Lord's on line; your prayer's secure
But for hackers there's no blessing.

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