

I know it can seem like I have an endless supply of witty anecdotes, piercing observations, helpful hints, rhetorical brilliance, and profound theology to call upon (hey, I can dream can't I!) but just between me and you, it can be a bit of a struggle sometimes to know what to say at this point in the service each week. Whatever the arrangements heaven has with popes and bishops, the angels' delivery network that brings a sparkly package of fresh inspiring words each week to the episcopal palaces doesn't stretch as far as mere parish priests. We are largely left to our own devices, and so we sometimes fall back on desperate measures in our search for inspiration. This week I found myself watching a Father Ted DVD. Not for my own entertainment I'm sure you understand, but as homiletic research, hoeing and manuring the soil with the sole selfless intention of keeping you engaged and listening, making fertile ground for the planting of God's word. If today, it all becomes suddenly surreal, you know what to blame.

For those who haven't experienced Channel Four's landmark comedy series or its many decades of repeats, Father Ted is a sitcom about three Irish priests, Ted, Jack and Dougal and their ecclesiastical adventures on Craggy island. The particular episode I was drawn to watch is one where the bishop comes to visit. I'm sure this has nothing to do with upcoming Bishop of Croydon's Clergy Study Day, scheduled as all such obligatory events are on my day off. No, no. Back to the show. With an episcopal descent imminent, Father Ted takes it upon himself to teach Fr Jack what he should say if a bishop asks him a question. This is rather more of a challenge than would at first appear, as Jack is permanently the worse for drink and his entire vocabulary, post-retirement, consists of just three words: Drink. Girls. And, a, four letter word that the programme makers got away with week after week by the expedient of changing the vowel in the word from a 'u' to and 'e'. I'll have to leave you to work it out for yourself.

Anyway, fired by the promise of even more drink, Jack is successfully taught to deflect any pontifical probing by saying either 'Yes' or 'that would be an ecumenical

matter.' Amazingly, the stratagem succeeds, Ted's teaching work works, and Jack avoids saying the wrong thing. It clearly pays to be prepared when the Bishop comes knocking.

Only twice in my life has a Bishop knocked on my door. Whether this makes me particularly lucky or uniquely unlucky I'm not quite sure. Once, was when the Rt Revd Bishop of Barking by name, barking by... episcopal area was on a visit to my previous parish to discuss the cowboy disaster movie that was the St Francis Barking church hall. The Bishop summoned me to my threshold to ask whether he should move the bollards that lived just outside the vicarage so he could park his car. 'I presume these are here in my honour?' he asked. The rest of the car park was empty at this point, but it was a fair enough assumption to make: usually parishes try to make sure that a visiting Bishop at least has somewhere to park (usually right by the exit so they're not necessarily delayed when leaving) and the usual means of ensuring that is the humble bollard.

What a more career-minded priest would have done was defaulted to one of Fr Jack's stand-bys. 'Yes, Bishop, I knew you were coming and I didn't want such an important visitor to have any problems finding a parking space' whereas what I actually said was the truth 'No, they're not for you, they're there so I don't have to share my front room with a 4 x 4'. I hope... no I'm sure Bishop Barking's episcopal dignity was not bruised by my lack of readiness for his coming. But just to make sure, on his next visit to the church I made sure there was a reserved parking space marked with purple bollards, silver bells and bunting, just for him. I think I might have imagined that last bit.

The other time a Bishop rang my doorbell, same parish, different bishop, was mere days into my first incumbency and I was able to answer the door, mop in hand, having just finished scrubbing the kitchen floor. Impressive eh? He wasn't to know that the cleaning frenzy he witnessed was in preparation for a visit from my mother, rather

than in his honour. Hopefully he went away thinking 'what a well organised, tidy and thoughtful new priest this parish has', though he may well have just thought 'what an obsessive weirdo'.

Anyway, the moral of the story is 'be prepared'. Especially when the Bishop is coming. Because if you leave it to chance, well you might get lucky and he'll find the vicarage swathed in clouds of bleach, but it's just as likely when he pulls up you'll have forgotten to save him a parking space.

At St Mary's this week we're busy preparing. Not for an episcopal visit, but for something far, far more important. Whisper it, but there are such things. Yes, here in Beddington we're preparing to celebrate *the* happiest event in the whole of human history, getting ready for the biggest celebration we're ever going to be invited to. It's going to take some serious slimming down to fit into that party dress because we're getting ready for Easter, gearing up for the resurrection life.

I'm not sure that any of us ever really truly realise what a big event Easter is. What a seismic game-change in our lives that morning six weeks away represents. It may not even be possible for us to approach understanding what the resurrection truly means until we're all close enough to touch it, but it must be the case that we're going to be much closer to *getting* Easter if we are prepared for it. Hence, Lent.

Lent is not about self-denial, or fasting *per se*; despite the life-lengthening, hip-shrinking, belly-busting benefits being claimed for the 5:2 diet, there is no intrinsic benefit to deliberately making yourself hungry or bad-tempered or deprived. Self-denial and fasting are there for us to use in Lent in order to focus our minds, to help us to prepare.

Part of that preparation is admitting to ourselves and to God that we're not self-sufficient super-efficient perfect beings, but that we do mess it up, sometimes

spectacularly, but mostly in bog-standard everyday ways. Admitting that we can't do perfectly well without God in our lives thank you very much. That's what all the penitential ash-on-the-forehead stuff is about.

Part of that preparation may be fasting, praying with our bodies as well as with our words. Then we are nursing that rumbling stomach or crazed craving not because it's good for us or anyone else to suffer, but to remind us that we need to be focussing on Jesus and fasting from the taste of sin.

And part of that preparation may be self-denial. Whether it is taking something up, giving something up or giving something away, we are preparing for the resurrection by moving ourselves, our concerns, our obsessions, our addictions and fixations out of focus, shifting our self-obsession to one side. Because when that great day of resurrection comes, we want nothing to be obscuring our view.

Lent is there every year because, if we approach our faith like everything else in our lives, come Easter we are likely to find ourselves winging it, hoping to get lucky, trying to cobble something together at the last minute, trusting our instincts: not really prepared at all. Look at what we're up against, and it's clear *that* strategy, if you can call it that, will not succeed. Because there's someone who'll be trying really, really hard to stop you getting to the Easter party. He was there those forty days with Jesus in the desert, giving it all he could. Jesus held out. We wouldn't have.

It's very easy to be caught off guard when temptation slithers our way. The great tempter is a smooth operator, and like all confidence tricksters, he uses our own desires and weaknesses, our greed, our fear, our pride to ensnare us. The devil can be beaten, but you do not have a hope in hell's chance of standing up to Satan, if you are not prepared.

Lent is here just for us: so let's use it, let's be prepared.

Not prepared like Fr Jack, having learned the right answers by rote, mindlessly mouthing them with no idea what they mean; not answering the door with a mop in our hand, looking like we're engaged and ready but actually prepared for someone else; not caught off guard and distracted but waiting with our hearts open and yearning, ready and eager to receive our risen Lord.

We *can* do that. And then what a party it will be.