

I am now some four months into my sixth decade. Even if I live as long as my grandfather Mr Long-lived McLivelong I'm indisputably past the half-way mark. It's been quite some time now since that portrait in the attic gave up struggling to keep its part of bargain. Age is supposed to have its up-sides, though everybody becomes a bit vague and unaccountably forgetful if you ask them to list what they are. So far, any compensations of ageing have been beaten to the Rectory door by presbyopia, which is the technical term for not having long enough arms to read without glasses anymore; miscellaneous apparently random throbs, twangs and twinges; various bits increasingly susceptible to gravitational pull and the bits that have anti-gravitational powers going grey; and instead of the worldly wisdom that's supposed to be the companion of the later years, I've just had increasing confusion.

I mean. Why does half the world want to live it's life mediated through a mobile phone camera rather than just see it as it is? Go to a concert, a tourist attraction, St Mary's Church on May Day, and you're presented with a sea of smartphones, as if the world is only truly experienced viewed through a screen.

Why is it that lottery winners always seem to be 1) rather overweight 2) decidedly middle-aged 3) Celtic?

How come just three members of St Marys Youth Link make exactly the same amount of noise in a Pizza restaurant, decibel for decibel, as a pair of jet engines at take off?

The only certainty is, the less time there is left, the more confusing it all is.

No solace is to be found by retreating into the domestic cocoon, because any thought-collecting clarifying pupation will inevitably be disrupted by the gauche 'n' gaudy irruption of reality TV. I've seen a lot of reality TV in the past six years- a time period that exactly and not coincidentally corresponds to the amount of time I have been in a civil partnership. I've had six years now of I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here, Big Brother, Celebrity Big Brother, Bake Off, Sewing Bee, X Factor and Britain's Got Talent. For starters. My own fault in many ways, most importantly sofa sloth. Eleven years. Please don't pity me, I've put up with it. Lockdown was a pain; it did however mean that there was two years without an episode of The Apprentice. All good things come to and end, and alas, The Apprentice is back.

It's been oozing onto the box for a few weeks now and there has been the persistent knocking in my brain, a question demanding to be answered: What is it that makes people want to watch the Apprentice?

I, mean, it's got Alan Sugar in it. And that's just for starters. It's fake, false, fallacious, fictitious and fabricated- and that's just the contestants.

Perhaps nothing happens except for a reason; perhaps having to sit through that drivel this is a divine nudge to get me in line with our ex-oil exec Archbishop and the new business-speak flip-chart culture of the C of E. But still. Question still unanswered: What is it the appeal of The Apprentice?

Well, rheumy confusion hasn't gained complete mastery of my mental processes yet, and I think I can answer that. I think the appeal of The Apprentice is not business, or money, it's hating people.

- 1) It's got Alan Sugar in it.
- 2) The contestants are specially selected to be arrogant, deluded, incompetent, aggressive and irritating; with unappealing or repulsive personal quirks, and shocking dress sense. And then they are put in situations designed to bring out their worst sides...
- 3) ...apart from the one 'nice' contestant, who never wins, but is there to put the loathable sides of the rest into even greater relief.

If you think I'm being unfair there, all I have to say is Katy Hopkins. QED.

The person to hate may be common to all lowest common denominator TV; alas for all cultural snobs all great literary works and stories rely on us finding the figure of hate, from the White Witch to General Woundwort, from Malvolio to Uriah Heap. And alas for all of us, take away the TV (hurrah) and finding someone to hate is central to humanity: migrant hordes and Tories; perverts and foreigners, toffs and commoners; we're in, you're out, not one of us, from families to football teams, from Westminster to Wallington we're never happier, never more cohesive, never closer together than when we have someone to hate. A congregation is never more together than during the sermon.

One institution of human life, though, is supposed to break this mould, is supposed to take us out of our comfort zone of contempt and, believe it or not, that

institution is the Church. Please don't laugh. Yes the Church has its ultra-haters: Rome is undermined by ultramontanes, protestants are plagued by puritans; yes Christianity has spent century after century demonising and scapegoating, dividing and persecuting, victimising and, indeed, hating, hating and hating some more. But, also. For two millennia the Christian church has been stuffed with people trying very, very hard not to live the life of hate, starting of course, with its founder.

Jesus refuses to divide and rule. Jesus refuses to hate. Listen to his words.

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies.*

Repeated again and again in word and action, the marginalised loved, those whom the world hates welcomed, those who are excluded included, again and again in word and action until finally, it is not us and them but us and him, one lonely man on a cross, spittle-spattered with the world's hatred, all people drawn together as one in scorn. Anyone else would hate back. But Jesus he repeats his mantra one last time.

*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*

It is always easier to hate than to love. It is an extraordinary person indeed who can pay back hate with love. But it can be done. We do not emerge from the womb with hostility in our hearts: we learn to hate. We learn that lesson early, and we learn it well. But we can unlearn our loathing and we can learn to love, we can learn to love as Jesus loved us.

I'm not suggesting that you turn on The Apprentice and sit there saying 'what wonderful, lovely people those contestants are: aren't they splendid'. If you did manage to force yourself to say that, you'd be lying, and that, as we all know, is a whole other slough of sin in itself. If you're getting into the spirit of things, you will be sat there frothing at the mouth, hurling imprecations and cuss words at the power-dressing prats parading across your screen. Don't worry: after all, the Apprentice is pantomime, the Apprentice is a game.

But remember, that we learn the rules of life when we play and games may not be real life but real people play them, and it's very, very easy for us to forget what is what and which is which and find that hate is starting to inhabit more and more of our lives.

We all have some unlearning to do. Mea culpa. And we can do it.

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven*