

One day I will surprise you by starting a sermon that isn't Remembrance Day not trying to make you laugh, but today is not that day so. I don't claim this as my own: it's humanity's earliest known joke. First written down in cuneiform- you can just imagine the split sides and merry mirth on the banks of the Euphrates- it changed the world of Victorian comedy when the discovery of Rosetta stone finally allowed it's translation. It's royalty of comedy. It almost always features in the lists of top ten jokes. So here it is.

What's brown and sticky?

I'm not the only fan of ancient Mesopotamian humour I see. With a pun for the sophisticated and hints of ickiness for the kids, it's something for everyone, a perfectly formed joke.

I'm not perusing the world's best stick joke because a long long long time ago I was but a simple northern lass and the only forms of amusement on the moors in the days before electricity reached Yorkshire (1987) involved sticks- or coal if you fancied yourself a cut above the rest. Nor is it because of puppy Miso's repeated stick-related visits to the vet- I mean, who'd have thought you could get sick from picking up something in your mouth that's already been through the jaws of twenty other dogs? No it's because I want to introduce you to another pithy stick anecdote, this one attributed to the renowned Georgian wit the Revd Sydney Smith. I think we went to the same college. Though standards had clearly plummeted by the time I got there.

A well travelled man approached our good Reverend Sydney Smith, wanting to show off about his fabulous adventures tracing the highways and byways of the globe. Nowadays he would simply have posted endless exotic location selfies on Instagram or Facebook but back then before the invention of photographs, electricity, computers and the internet, the would-be Phileas Fogg had to find more retro ways of showing off. So he rapped his walking stick on the pavement. "You see this stick, sir?" he said "This stick has been round the world."

"Indeed," Revd Smith answered "and still a stick."

Now, naturally, it doesn't matter how far a stick travels, what wonders it abuts on its journeying; accidents and hostile environments excepted, it will not be changed by the experience. It's a piece of dead wood after all. Sydney Smith however wasn't

really referring to the stick: more its owner who apparently could accompany his cane on its global peregrinations and yet remain a bore and a show off when he returned. It seems, for all his experiences he could look, but not see, listen but not hear, travel and not be changed. Faced with the wonders of the world his response was to reach for the selfie-stick. Just another person who visits Pisa and takes the obligatory photo of them pushing the tower over. Just another tourist snapping away the evidence that 'I've been there' without ever really having been truly *there* at all. Another interminable slide show of the self in the projector.

It is easy to sneer at the sham and the superficial, the surface skimming selfie-snapping sightseer, but they are merely posting on social media a perversity all humans share, the wilful inability to see the wonder that God has made that surrounds us every moment of our lives. Please don't gag; I realise that sounds like a line from a particularly naff musical theatre [platinum jubilee] song, but it is true. We just can't see the wonder around us.

It will take a long time for us to fully process what happened in the last couple of years: the disruption to our lives the pandemic has caused, the changes in our thinking and emoting those months of lockdown and longer months of fear have wrought. We're still emerging from the shelter, blinking in the sunlight looking for what's left. We can hope against experience that as a species we will have learned the lessons we need to for when the next time comes; we can but hope. As individuals there is much we might have learned about ourselves and our worlds: what we truly value, what is truly important to us. One of the more hopeful things of the pandemic years I think- and there aren't many of those but this is one- was that for a time many of us started to experience the wonder that can be found in the smaller things of the world. Remember all those stories of people suddenly hearing birdsong. Identifying the wildflowers that forced their way through the pavement cracks into our attention. Strolls in the park, the companionship of pets, friends on the phone. Yes, much of this we noticed because there wasn't much else there to take our previously over-saturated attention, but it was and is still there waiting to be noticed, and ever will be, the wonder of God's Spirit moving in the world. We'd missed it before and no doubt we will learn to forget it again if we haven't already but it was and is still there, and ever will be, the wonder of God's Spirit moving in the world.

We can miss the wonder of small things and that is understandable, forgivable even, to be expected- it's no surprise that the small things normally escape our notice. But sadly it's not just the tiny and the insignificant we overlook: most of all, most sadly of

all, we miss the wonder of the most wonderful things in which God's spirit moves: which is... ourselves.

Right at the beginning of creation God declares:

*"Let us make humanity in our own image."*

That's you, and me and at the moment, just under eight billion others. The very image of God.

Apart from the odd saint and mystic (and they're always odd), I don't think we've ever even started to comprehend that or what it means. We really haven't.

The very image of God: you, and me and eight billion others. The most wonderful things in the world in which God's spirit moves.

And:

In the past month in *this* country a million adults went an entire day without eating because they could not afford to put a meal on the table.

The use of food banks is now at record levels - more than two million people used them in the UK- one of the richest countries in the world- in the past year.

In the low income countries of the world seven out of every eight people have not received even a single dose of vaccine against COVID-19.

Most dramatic of all, human lives are being lost right now in conflicts in Ethiopia, Yemen, Ukraine and elsewhere in the world; whole cities destroyed, the past destroyed, the future wrecked for those left living.

None of this needs to be. All of it is the result of something either humans have done or something humans could do but haven't done. All of it is the result of not seeing the image of God in other people, a refusal to see the wonder of the most wonderful things in the world in which God's spirit moves. We're not *individually* to blame for this, but we all have a part in it.

God is gone up on high this Ascension day, carrying the dead-wood dead-weight of a sinful world on his shoulders; and yet the terrible drawing gravity of indifference is as nothing against the upward pull of love.

The Ascension is not the promise of heaven as our final destination if we behave ourselves and go to church every Sunday, at least not just that. The Ascension is the affirmation of humanity's infinite value, confirmation that God gazing in wonder at the works of his hands and seeing that it is indeed good.

It is the Ascension that shows us most clearly that the stick is not dead but dormant; the sap is still flowing deep within and the rod will bloom.

Now we can see the destination we realise that we are in fact journeying on, we are not stood still, languishing, filling the empty hours with ever desperate amusements, ticking off the bucket list because there's nothing else to do.

And when we see Jesus ascended to heaven, we see his brothers and sisters there too. We see the image of God in our brothers and sisters, carried into the very heart of divinity.

And so we cease to be Sydney Smith's stick and everywhere we look, we see God's spirit moving in our world.