

Strange though it may be for me to admit it, there is something that fascinates me about the manner of death of Pietro Aretino. I'm assuming you are unaware of the man's name and unfamiliar with his oeuvre being as this Renaissance Italian has the dubious distinction of being generally acknowledged, by those who know such things, as the man who was Europe's first pornographer. Something to do with tractors I believe.

I must state quite clearly here and now that I have never seen any of Mr Aretino's work even though we can be certain it would appear rather quaint in a world that can send 50 Shades of Grey (which, I also hasten to add I have also neither read nor seen) several times to the top of the bestseller's list and also place Cosmopolitan Magazine not only on newsagent's shelves but also in dentists waiting rooms. I must confess to having thumbed through Cosmo when waiting to have my root canals done.

But anyway, turning away from his Pietro Aretino's successors back to his demise. He was relaxing in the kitchen, as one does, exchanging risqué jokes with his sister, as one also does. At one point, when was leaning back on his chair, his sister proffered a morsel he found particularly amusing, with the result that he was so overwhelmed in hysterical laughter, he tipped the chair backwards and cracked his skull on the hearth, promptly giving Heaven the novelty of deciding what to do with the very first purveyor of dirty pictures. Alas, or perhaps fortunately, posterity has not found it fitting to record precisely what the joke was; but as many of the choristers are now precariously perched on misericords, it would be risky of me to repeat it if I did know.

Whatever your perspective, whether it's just desserts or just a great way to go, there is something somehow poetically fitting about this particular man dying laughing at a filthy joke. But there are surprising depths to this tale hidden away beneath the bathos, depths that tell us of the absurdity of life and just how fleeting and ephemeral it is. How, in the words of the old Prayer Book burial service, 'In the midst of life, we are in death'. All it takes to abruptly curtail a promising career at the cutting edge of renaissance publishing is a blue joke and an unwisely balanced dining chair. Human life is in the last count, transitory, its fond pretensions, preposterous.

If you think this is a particularly bleak view of existence, and as Christians we should be filled with joy, beaming from ear to ear and dancing gleefully from one day to the next, well I think that would be ignoring one of the grand sweeping themes of the

scriptures. Read the mouth dried up like a potsherd, tongue sticks to my jaws, my hands and feet have shrivelled; I can count all my bones Psalms. Happy stuff. Read vanity of vanities, all is vanity and the chasing after wind, Ecclesiastes. Read the apogee of Eeyore, I am of small account, salvation history's most unfortunate victim of arbitrary circumstances, merrily minding his own business till God whips over the chair he's balancing on, Job. There's a deep vein buried deep in the Bible that's all shrivelling away into insignificance in the face of a providence that is incomprehensible and can only be accepted. Lacking God's perspective, we can only be buffeted by the seemingly random ups and mostly downs of life. We are but as dust, and when the wind blows, we are gone.

There is something that gives back a dignity to humanity, gives us backing for that gnawing sense that humans have always had that we somehow matter, an answer that pulls us back from the atheistic abyss of meaninglessness, an answer that raises us above the existential emptiness of being bio-machines for propagating DNA, an answer that can even bring worth and dignity to a sordid man's sordid death on the tiles of a Venetian kitchen. See, I always bring you a happy ending. [We need to move from the kitchen to the upper room and the little scene painted in our gospel tonight. Jesus appears to his frightened disciples- who knows maybe they'd been telling each other jokes to keep their spirits up. Jesus appears in that upper room and gives his disciples the answer to the yawning existential meaninglessness that seems to be our lot.]

And the answer we have to the meaninglessness of life is to meet the risen Jesus, return his gaze and say "you lived and you died for me."

We are of small account. Vanishingly few people will notice when we go, and in a very short time nobody will remember us at all. But Jesus loved us. God sent his only Son for us. Jesus died on the cross for us. And so we are of small account no longer. That life poured out on the wood of Calvary was poured out for us. And on those grounds only, of the price of the precious blood, on the merits of Jesus, do we claim our worth.

Fleeting, transient and absurd we are. And beyond all value.