

Most people (especially in London) are more than happy to walk by on the other side and ignore you. A bit of a problem if you're in trouble and a shock if you're fresh from the provinces, lost and need a fat-chance friendly face to point you to Leicester Square. But after a while the realisation will dawn that being ignored is one of the many advantages that life in the capital gives to its denizens. Yes, nobody cares as you walk down the street, but also- ha! nobody cares! However, you cannot entirely escape the attentions of your fellow apes and occasionally you will find yourself in the centre of somebody's crosshair sights. More common in the provinces, but even in the couldn't-care-less-gotta-go-things-to-do-bigger-fish-to-fry metropolis even here there are people of a particular bent who will always feel obliged to share their unsolicited verbal wisdom with complete strangers, aka, you.

'Oi are you a vicar?' Ooh! I bet your parents christened you Sherlock didn't they? No sh... shame it suits you. There are more menacing things people like to shout out, usually accompanied by either a car speeding away (which is naturally the best thing for it to do) or an alcohol-fuelled stagger into the gutter, unpleasant and scary: but there are less immediately threatening occasions where-goody!-a stranger feels compelled to share their wisdom; indeed sometimes the intent is, well almost benign.

Let me elaborate. The fate of those with a face miserable in repose that only occasionally breaks into a lovely smile is a lifetime of an assortment of strangers who will sidle up to you on your park bench and declare:

'Cheer up, it might never happen!'

It's usually well meaning, I know, but unless the person has actually built a time machine and can whisk us back to a time before it did actually happen so I can return to the past and shout at the confused-looking Leeds lad 'you'll regret doing that in years to come'. Unless they have that contraption, 'Cheer up, it might never happen' may not be the most accurate statement anyone can make.

Now I know that, unless I try very hard, my face reveals my inner mood perfectly to the extent that I may as well replace my eyebrows with one on those tube station dot matrix displays... Morden 3 mins... bored now... that's nonsense bishop... So, I guess, though I don't think I spend all my time feeling gloomy and being morose my countenance says otherwise. And, I have to admit, catch me on a normal day and ask me 'what's the state of this glass?' and I'll likely say something along the lines of: the glass is not half full. It's not even half empty. It's been pretty much drained dry, just a

few drops at the bottom which I'm pretty sure will turn out to be a combination of flaws in the glass and a bit of foam that is probably spittle. Oh, and if I'm not mistaken, that's a very small drowned fruit fly.

All said then, I'd clearly finally found my niche in life when the call came and the Church of England decided to declare me it's public face in a small corner of Anglican-World because in so many ways, the Christian faith we are called to proclaim afresh in each generation is profoundly pessimistic about humanity. Glum and gloomy, low and lugubrious, there's no misery-guts like a Christian.

After all, we invented such doctrines as...

Original sin- the notion that the second you are born, before you do anything at all you are sinful and it's downhill all the way after that. Or perhaps try the cheerless perverse precept 'substitutionary atonement', which states that you are so wicked that you deserve to be nailed to a cross. Not too bad? Well there's always eternal conscious torment for those who just think bad thoughts and the cherry on the cloudy cake, the desolate doctrine of double predestination, which dismally declares that before you're born and even had the chance to sample sin to see what it's actually like, God has decided you're going to end up in hell. Or heaven, but that's *extremely* unlikely. Just look at you.

I hasten to stress that it's not necessary to believe any of these threatening theologies in order to be a communicant member of the Church of England, though it doesn't mean you'll never hear them spouted in the Established Church, nor that Anglican theology is all cheery and affirming. Every time we meet together, we confess our manifold sins and wickedness. Until Common Worship gave us the option to put it to one side, every eucharistic celebration for a good five hundred years had us murmuring the Prayer of Humble Access, known to its friends as the grovelling prayer— *we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under they table*, and on...

To recap. In so many ways and on so many occasions the Christian faith is profoundly pessimistic about humanity.

But.

Not today. Today uncharacteristically we're pushing out the boat, donning our dancing shoes and getting the party started. Today, the feast of Ascension is the most optimistic day in the Christian calendar! Make the most of it while you can cos' it's

like the English summer, one day of brilliance and then the gloom returns. But that's tomorrow.

It's not coincidence that the Ascension is a day of great optimism. It could be a day of great sadness because Jesus is leaving us to go home to heaven; it could be a day to leave us bereft because Our Lord's earthly ministry is done. But it isn't. Today Jesus ascends into heaven. He is lifted from our sight. And although it's possibly not entirely historically accurate to imagine this as Jesus slowly rising into the air, up, up and away, like a loosed helium balloon, till our vision of him is obscured by clouds it is symbolically *really* helpful to be thinking of things in this way. Because if we're being optimistic, if things are going the right way, if we're happy about what the future holds, we think about things as heading... up, up, up. Up is for optimism. So for Christians, in a very real way, today, things are looking up.

Today, we rise above it.

Today, we hold our heads up high.

Today, the only way is up.

You see, though Christianity is endlessly pessimistic about the square one of human nature, it is ecstatically optimistic about the human destination. We start as low as you can go, and we ascend to the heights.

Here's St Paul writing to the Christians in Corinth

*In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body. We are the body of Christ.*

And where is the body now? That body has ascended into heaven.

Here's St Paul again, writing to the Christians in Rome.

*All of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death... Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

As Christians here on earth, we have one foot in the grave and one foot in heaven: it is in the abode of the divine that the journey of our salvation ends. Incorporated into our God incarnate we are raised with him to the realms of divinity; God became human, now humanity dwells with God.

It began with the Word speaking the universe into being, that same Word born in poverty in a stable, died in agony on the Cross, swept clean the tomb and reaching apotheosis today as the Son returns triumphant with his humanity to the throne of glory. It has been a journey that has slowly revealed the true value we have in God's eyes, the process of salvation that tells the extent of the love that God holds for us.

We cannot comprehend it, not really. All we can do is direct the gaze of our souls upwards. To see we have come full circle, we have returned to God.

Today, we hold our heads up high.

Today, the only way is up.