

The Soviet Union was famous for many things- for its astonishing national sacrifice in the fight against fascist Germany, for sending the first dog into orbit and then the first man into space; for large, empty department stores and large lengthy queues; for five-year plans and spontaneous demonstrations of joy when tractor factory output increased; for worthy but dull social realist art and terminally dull military parades presided over by a sombre old man in a fur hat, always bearing the expression of someone who knows that his predecessor is now stuffed and on permanent display on the other side of Red Square.

There are many celebrated and many notorious aspects of that now-departed social experiment, but humour wasn't one of them. If the Cold War was overall an exercise in stalemate, it is incontrovertibly true that the West did win on the funny front.

Nixon was a rather poor taste joke if not a tragic farce, but Gerald Ford was the best American slapstick since Oliver Hardy. Ronald Reagan was gift-wrapped with a bow on top for satirists. Even Ford could appear witty and with it in comparison. 'Does President Reagan colour his hair' the former President was once asked? 'No, he's just prematurely orange', came the reply.

Britain of course provided the monkeys to Washington's organ grinders, and the real killer jokes from such Cold War gems as the Goons, and Monty Python. Russia never really stood a chance.

But it did try. There is one at least Soviet joke that outlasted the system that gave birth to it long enough for me to pick it up, I think, quoted by a columnist in the Observer. If the joke sounds familiar you must have read the same column. Not that you've heard this sermon before. Definitely not. It might be the only evidence we have of Soviet humour, but it's not bad. Here it is.

Every day a man leaves the factory pushing a wheelbarrow full of rubbish. The security guard is convinced the man is stealing something, but despite searching the wheelbarrow every day, he never finds anything in it but rubbish. Years later, both men are retired and meet accidentally in a café. 'What was it you were stealing?' asked the guard. 'Wheelbarrows' came the reply.

The point to this is not that I have run out of jokes to start sermons with and am now serving you Soviet barrel scrapings out of desperation- next week Chairman Mao's best puns.

The point is that the wheelbarrow joke expertly skewers all of us by so elegantly illustrating a universal human shortcoming. It's something about the way our brains work, but we never see all a picture: we choose to concentrate on part of the scene and what we choose to foreground often prevents us from seeing something far more important in the background. Sometimes, yes we are too embarrassed to mention the elephant in the room; but sometimes it's even more embarrassing still: we just can't see it.

For most of us, most of our lives, most of the time is one long exercise in missing the blindingly obvious that's right under our noses and right in front of our eyes. Only very occasionally does the picture come into focus and we see God, everywhere, in our world.

God's Holy Spirit pervades and infuses all of nature; the creator God's fingerprints are all over the works of his hands; hemming us in, behind and before; intimate in a way no human could ever be. And still most of us most of the time live most of our lives like the young man in Ecclesiastes, following the inclination of our hearts and the desire of our eyes: always rummaging in the rubbish, never spotting the wheelbarrow.

There will be times in our lives, though- a sunset, a piece of music, the birth of a child, words heard in church (you never know)- maybe just a few times in our lives when something breaks through, light floods our vision and momentarily, we step back and see the whole picture, we see ourselves, our world, all we have ever known and loved and hated and desired and rejected: everything cradled in God's arms. We look up, turn round, gently allow our focus to drift away from ourselves, and find that we are gazing into the face of Love Divine.

Fickle creatures, we are soon distracted; it's not long before the glimpse of Heaven is forgotten, our attention flits to an amusing inconsequential detail in the picture, and there we are back trawling through the trash.

And yet. And yet, we have glimpsed the full picture. We can be distracted but we cannot now un-know what we have known, we cannot un-see what we have seen. It will still be there, the next time we catch the glimpse of God out of the corner of our eye, and the next time, and the next. We may be comforted; we may be inspired:

chances are we'll be absolutely petrified, but no matter how often we look the other way, he's always there when we look again.

As disciples of Jesus our aim should be to get to the point where we always see the bigger picture, to get to the point where without thinking we will notice the man stealing wheelbarrows, where we will be like the metaphorical soldier in the second letter to Timothy eager only to please his officer: where we will have that of paradox of the sight to see the whole picture, when our tunnel vision is fixed on God.

Fickle creatures, we are soon distracted. But one day, perhaps, we will hold ourselves still as we gaze at the reciprocated gaze of God.