

Life, though sometimes exciting, is almost always predictable. It is governed by rules and expectations; things that always happen, always happen; things that normally happen, normally happen. Although we may bemoan the boredom that this necessarily entails, it's the only way we really know how to operate. Generally it works quite nicely for us. It's the way we manage to not spend every day confused by the huge vista of choices that open up in front of us, unless of course we've just been to Starbucks. Lifetimes have been lost in the queue while someone's circuits finally frazzle at the choice of chocolate or cinnamon sprinkle. Rules and expectations is the way we can go to bed most nights not having been hounded by an unruly mob after committing the forbidden faux pas. It's the way we manage to not be regularly reduced to strawberry jam because each road crossing has its own way of indicating when it's safe to cross. What does the blue man with the salivating dog light mean? The rules are not only useful, they are also quickly learned. As easy as ABC, even my dog can do it, which is little short of amazing given that if a flea hops onto his back the available local brain power instantly triples. Even he can learn the rules, which is a sign of just how easy it is.

Of course it doesn't quite work 100 per cent smooth. Maybe we're cruising on autopilot so we're not paying too much attention and so assume that we have to join this queue, when if we'd asked, which we didn't, we'd have found out it was the wrong queue. We didn't ask partly because it just seemed obvious to us that it was the queue for the loo rather than the delegates waiting to get into the tripe tasting convention- but mostly we didn't ask because the part of our brain that is still a small furry creature trying to survive on the savannah was being very anxious not to draw attention to itself by saying the wrong thing and tripping the scared taboo switch. Trip that, and the deep primeval bits of our brains know it means we'll be running home yet again chased by a pitchfork wielding, torch toting mob. Archetypally speaking that is. Though that might just be me being paranoid. Grow up gay in the 1970s, you might be too.

We like the rules because, not only do they work most of the time, but also because we are, down to the last man and woman (and dog), mentally lazy beyond belief. Just, staggeringly so. Inside your head is not as you might fondly imagine the Bodelian library full of furiously typing researchers hunched over their computer terminals. It's more a middle-aged fat bloke, beer in hand, slumped on the sofa snoring in front of a widescreen TV tuned to Channel 5. That's what it's really like in there. That's why car salesmen manage to make a good living, why you never manage to switch energy provider despite your heating bills going up like clockwork every year, why Jeremy

Clarkson has spent the past 20 years being paid to appear on TV instead of being locked up, and why we've spent the best part of a century and a half voting the same people into government despite the mess they always make of it.

The result of this combination of knowing that daily life follows predictable rules and being born with outrageous mental laziness is that, sometimes we rely so much on the world being a series of no-thinking-required clockwork cogs that we get it wrong. Lured into a lazy sense of security we join the wrong queue, say the right thing in the wrong place or the wrong thing in the wrong place or, end up like my dog furiously barking at a replacement fence panel, utterly thrown when something that hasn't been following the recipe lands on our plate.

Today I'm talking about this for what you might think is possibly the most tenuously tangential of reasons, but is in fact the result of mental laziness of a mind-boggling extent. You see, the example of assuming that the world has been following a plan we can understand when in fact it has been doing something completely different, the example of that first springs to my mind was an event some seven or eight years ago, in church, on Ascension Sunday, in the middle of a sermon. You can probably see the connexion. Spooky eh?

Back in those dustily (thankfully) distant East London days I had invited my friend Alex, then the curate of a neighbouring parish, (in Chingford of all places) to come and be our guest preacher for Ascension Day. He gave an engaging, good homily, and as always when it's someone they're not used to seeing up front the congregation were faking it like true pro's, looking alert and interested, taking some trouble to hide the contempt and boredom that was usually written all over their faces at the sermon slot. Those that still had their eyes open, that is.

It was only as Alex was explaining how his elder son Isaac had just that week been telling him about how horse chestnut flowers pointed upwards because they were telling us that Ascension day was coming that I noticed a battle royal of competing facial expressions spreading over the face of one of the congregation: utter confusion struggling for control with absolute horror as the poor chap attempted to assimilate the shock of witnessing a priest who had broken his vows of celibacy, had at least one son, and then mentioned it during Mass as if it was nothing more remarkable than being the owner of a charmingly daft dog. After a furious whispered exchange with the churchwarden the look on his face changed to to one beyond description when the young man digested the fact that the church of St Francis, Barkingside he had been attending, erm, religiously for the past year, was not in fact, as he had

assumed, a Roman Catholic church, but a Church of England one, one where priests were sometimes allowed to marry, have sons and even, occasionally, mention them in sermons.

Amazingly he stayed with us for the next few years, and by the time someone mentioned civil partnerships it was no more shocking for him than a cup of tea and a fairy cake. Even if it had pink sprinkly bits on.

I'm hoping by now you have understood the phenomenon I'm talking about: I'm not sure there's a succinct phrase to describe the experience of 'taking it all for granted, assuming everything is as we have come to expect, not noticing something that something that doesn't fit is right under our noses and not quite paying that something the attention it really deserves'. We may, however be able to be more succinct. In our annual trip through the Christian year the preceding (taking it all for granted, assuming etc. etc.) is *precisely* what we do with our celebration today. So I think we can settle on calling the effect (taking it all for granted, assuming etc. etc.) 'Ascension syndrome'.

Most years, most churches, you'd never know there'd been an Ascension at all: it's usually on a Thursday and nobody but the Vicar goes to church on a Thursday and probably not even her and the first we know about the Ascension is when we're sat in church and it's 'The Sunday after Ascension.' But not this church, not this year.

We do, quite rightly, see Easter as the climax of the Christian story- there's chocolate for one thing- and there's no denying it's the all-singing all-dancing big production number of the Gospel revue. But climactic though it is, Easter is not actually the denouement of the drama. For that, you have to wait till today. All those resurrection stories- the empty tomb, the upper room, the Emmaus road, the fish breakfast, Mary Magdalene and the gardener- all the Easter gospels we have heard these past seven weeks, have, like horse chestnut flowers pointing upward, been pointing to this day. Jesus rose from the dead. And then he rose into heaven. It's an absolutely vital part of the good news, not just a bit stuck on the end to explain why Jesus is not around now taking the service and living in Lambeth Palace.

The Resurrection gives us our Christian hope of eternal life: the Ascension tells us where that life will be lived.

The incarnation tells us of God bringing holiness to humanity; the ascension tells us of God bringing humanity to heaven.

How important is that?

How great is that?

And we thought something else was going on.

What we celebrate today really is the happy heart of our faith, the warm glow of the gospel.

And to think, we almost didn't notice it at all.