

Last week photographs were all over the media of queues that had formed at the summit of Mount Everest. Proof positive that there'll always be a line first thing in the morning on pension day even when you put the post office at the highest point on earth. The photographs were astonishing. A human logjam, there at the roof of the world. If you're an eternal optimist, if you're always ready to see the positive side of everything you might want to say: isn't it great? Look how far humanity has progressed. Sixty-seven years ago, nobody had ever made it to the top of the highest mountain: now they're queuing to get there. Humanity is always, metaphorically and in this case literally, on the up. Obviously in order to make such an upbeat assessment of our species our optimist would have to be entirely ignorant of the last three years of British politics, but then it is possible. Despite our national self regard, most of the 7 billion or so people on the globe are really not in the slightest bit interested in the shenanigan goings-on of a small cold wet island at the edge of the world.

Back to the queue at the top of the world. So many questions to ask. Why do so many people want to do so pointless a thing? Why do so many people want to do so dangerous a thing, especially when it's so pointless? I'm assuming there's nobody here who's actually ascended the ogre (as it's known to professionals, or at least Chris Bonnington in his 1970s Bovril advert), and if you have, keep quiet because you'll be embarrassed and my sermon ruined. So we can't ask a mountaineer why do something so dangerous and so pointless as climb Everest, but then we don't need to. We can just ask ourselves why we do the pointless and dangerous things we do: the reason will undoubtedly be the same.

I think we'll avoid questions about pointless things because I don't want anybody being tempted to say 'coming to church' or 'listening to this sermon', but I would like to ask you to ponder this question, 'what's the most dangerous thing you've done in your life?' Probably not anything involving scaling mountains. Given that it's 80 years since the end of the second world war, probably anything military is also unlikely. Maybe you've done skydiving or parachuting to raise money for a worthy cause, or even more inexplicably for fun. Bungee jumping perhaps, though I doubt it's really dangerous. Immensely stupid, but not dangerous. Making Boris Johnson prime minister: now that would be both dangerous and stupid. Back to personal danger. If your youth took place in the sixties then it could be that your peak risk taking was at some free festival in a muddy field in Berkshire where you once ingested some odd looking pills before inhaling some strange looking tobacco and thus flirted with danger by combining aspirin with oregano. Maybe you've dived with death by eating

food from a street market in Bangkok, or even more dangerous still sampled the wares of a burger van parked in a lay by in Romford.

I'd be pretty sure that the most dangerous thing I've ever done was a childhood amusement consisting of carrier bag sledging. Before I describe it, please can I say, don't do this- it's not big and it's not clever. So. Whenever it snowed, which of course being raised in the Yorkshire tundra it did pretty much all winter every winter when I was a child, just like you all remember long hot summers, we all remember long cold winters. And long cold summers. Anyway, whenever it snowed, we local kids would grab our plastic carrier bags and use them as cheap makeshift toboggans to slide down the embankment. So far, not too dangerous, no more than any other sort of sledging. What was dangerous, beyond the point of stupidity, was that our plastic piste was the railway embankment, and when you got to the bottom of the slide you were launched straight onto the tracks of the Leeds to York part of the East Coast main line. Amazingly nobody ever got killed, maimed or otherwise injured in this pursuit, but even now, several decades on, the sheer idiotic danger of it will still give me the shivers. I've long thought this was, if not the most stupid, it was certainly the most dangerous thing I have ever done. But not so. Probably the most dangerous thing I will ever do in my life is something many of you in this room have already done this morning, and that is driving. Statistically, driving is immensely dangerous, so risky is it, it's astonishing that any of us actually ever get behind the wheel without being completely overtaken with fear. As an activity it kills proportionally more of us each year than pretty much anything else we do, definitely more than sledging or mountaineering. And yet, we constantly underestimate the danger we are undergoing each time we fire up the ignition.

We shouldn't I suppose be surprised: human estimations are, after all, notoriously wide of the mark and wildly inaccurate.

We underestimate, for example, how hard other people actually work (this is why the well off think they are rich because of their hard work rather than the rather more realistic random chance). We underestimate how observant children are and that they can and will perfectly repeat any swear word you've spoken even if you were whispering and they were in another part of the house at the time. We underestimate how long it takes to lose weight (forever), how early you have to set off to get somewhere on time, how easy we are to manipulate, how probable most coincidences actually are, and of course the power of advertising.

To balance things out, when we're not underestimating, we're veering erratically the other way. We overestimate our own abilities, how hard we work, the chances of us being a victim of violent crime, the extent to which other people notice what we're wearing, our intelligence, our looks and, of course, just to turn the wheel full circle, our driving ability. Overestimated, every time.

Getting it right, getting things in proportion, seeing things as they actually are, are not, it would have to be said, usually on display when humanity opens up its psyche and invites the world to take a look.

So, let me bring us back to today and this feast of the ascension- the last few minutes are connected, I promise you. We always underestimate the Ascension- its meaning in the story of salvation, its importance in the journey of humanity, its significance for our faith and its ready symbolism of our destiny. It should be as popular as Christmas or Easter, but instead we're now shifting celebrating Ascension to the nearest Sunday because if we do anything on the Thursday, pretty much nobody turns up. Every year, we wholly underestimate the importance of the day and the significance of the event it celebrates.

And what is so important about the Ascension? It tells us of that the ultimate destination of the resurrection we celebrated on Easter Sunday is heaven. Jesus didn't rise again on Easter Day and then just sort of hang around forever enjoying his new life. After those forty days of making sure that the people who needed to see him risen saw him, he moved on to what was always the final point of the trajectory: heaven.

Jesus returned from whence he came: but he returned *changed*. He did not return the same. The baby Jesus did not bear the wounds of Calvary, but the ascended Christ does. Not only is Jesus, returning to heaven, changed: his return now changes where he came from. Heaven- the abode of God and his angels- is now the home of humanity.

So Ascension talk is of transformation, transfiguration, transcendence. It's not easy to get a grip on, perhaps another reason why we rarely pay much attention to this day. We're trying to understand something that our language is utterly incapable of conveying. Not easy. Impossible maybe. But we could rely on symbolism to help us understand what's going on. And the symbolism of the Ascension has been there from day one. It's pretty blunt. Jesus tries to make it easy for us: he could have returned to heaven from anywhere, but instead he went up the mountain- with his

disciples. Our instincts understand this symbolically, he- and we- are 'going up' spiritually as well as physically. We understand this sort of symbolism instinctively: that's why people make such a big deal out of such a pointless exercise as scaling Everest.

And then Jesus went into heaven by ascending- up again. From below to above. From the earth to heaven. Not as a physical direction but as a spiritual reality.

If we always underestimate the importance of the Ascension in our faith, what our celebration of this day should leave us no doubt about is that we cannot overestimate the potential of humanity. When Jesus takes his disciples up the mountain with him he takes us too. When Jesus ascends into heaven he takes us with him. Incorporated into Christ- taken into his body- we are destined for the heights.

And this time, there's no queue when you get to the top.