

There's always one. Gather any group of people together, no matter how big no matter how small, and it won't be long before that person makes their presence felt. There's always one.

That person is the one waiting to prick your balloon. The person who will always point out the invisible-to-everyone-else hairline crack that you hadn't notice that of course portends doom and disaster; the one who will happily deliver that cold hard slap to your face accompanied by the stinging harsh shriek of 'wicked child' slapped into your ears. It's that person you've only ever seen dancing once, which was on the day of your parade, and they were dancing a rain dance. It is that person who will gleefully bring you down to earth with a big hard bump, pull the rug out from under your feet and take the wind out of your sails. You can be guaranteed a helping hand to pull the wool from over your eyes if it means there's something unpleasant you're going to see. That dog never leaves its bed in the manger and the longer it's there the louder it's bark becomes. Life is not meant for enjoyment, it's meant for toil and sweat and tears, if you're lucky, and then you're just getting what you deserve. No ball games, you can't do that here, turn that down right now, not if I can help it, not in my backyard, not now, not tomorrow, not ever. The party-pooing killjoy spoilsport naysaying nimby pessimist peddler of doom and gloom: every life ever lived has to involve a run in with at least one; most of us meet them regularly.

And for many, many people in our nation today that person is the Church. For so many people in this day and age if you wanted to express the message of Christianity in body language, it would be the folded arms, the pursed lips, the disapproving glare, the wagging, pointing finger.

Open a newspaper, turn on the TV and ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that's the sort of Christianity you will see. Just think of the last year and what media coverage the church has generated. True, journalists and broadcasters only want to talk to us when we have something unpleasant to say: but truth be told ninety nine times out of a hundred we have nothing better to say.

Which is astonishing, amazing, jaw-droppingly gobsmacking; almost, to use a more apt metaphor, beyond belief. How did we get to that point? We have been entrusted, gifted with the most glorious of messages and we have managed to turn it into a way to make people feel inadequate, dirty, wicked and sinful. That really takes some doing.

How can we have turned the world-shatteringly amazing, sweepingly glorious vision of the prophet Isaiah into an obsession with gender rôles, the minutiae of (other people's) relationships and demanding a legal right to discriminate? Listen:

*A voice cries, 'Prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord.
Make a straight highway for our God across the desert.
Let every valley be filled in, every mountain and hill be laid low.
Let every cliff become a plain, and the ridges a valley;
then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all mankind shall see it;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'*

*Go up on a high mountain, joyful messenger to Zion.
Shout with a loud voice, joyful messenger to Jerusalem.
Shout without fear, say to the towns of Judah,
'Here is your God.'*

*Here is the Lord coming with power, his arm subduing all things to him.
The prize of his victory is with him, his trophies all go before him.
He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms,
holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes.*

Now there is a vision that is really worth shouting about. There is a good that would fly off the shelves. There is a message that is easy to hear and easier still to deliver: if we haven't completely messed up our chances of getting a fair hearing by obsessing about genitals, there is a message people will be eager to hear.

You won't hear our official spokesmen declaiming that message of our faith on the News at Ten on any day in any way, shape or form. You may not recognise it, but you will hear it though, week in week out, year in year out in churches up and down this country, even in this one, every time you hear the words 'I baptise you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'.

Baptism is the declaration *par excellence* of the sheer optimism of the Christian faith, the ultimate riposte to the naysayer and the doom-monger, the loudest possible declaration that Our Lord is coming and God is good. From the outside baptism appears to be but a simple- if ancient- ceremony involving little more than words and water. Many times the participants haven't a clue what's happening, especially as it's still mostly infants who are brought to the font. But don't be fooled by the externals.

Something profound is going on there, something joyous, something life changing and earth-shaking, because baptism is the first step on that path in the wilderness, the first footfall on the highway, the first glimmering rays creeping over the horizon of the glory of the Lord that is to be revealed.

Most of us will have no memory at all of the day we were baptised: it's just one of those things that happened to us before we were even capable of remembering; one of the routine stages of infant life like registering our birth, getting our vaccinations, the first day at school. But it isn't. Baptism is probably the most important thing that will ever have happened to you. If most of us can't remember the day it happened, we should never forget that it has. And that priceless gift we have been given, is available to anyone.

The church no longer finds itself easily able to say 'if you're not baptised, that's it, God doesn't love you, he never will and you're out for eternity'. Somewhere along the line the realisation has dawned that God's love is much much bigger than whatever ever concerns us, much, much bigger than we can claim to comprehend. And yes, baptism of itself does not confer the inalienable right to march straight on through the pearly gates as if you own the place. On the other hand your chances of winning the lottery are greatly helped if you buy a ticket. It is easily the best thing any church has to offer: each splash of font water another paving stone on that highway across the desert.

Now let's be upfront and honest. For some people baptism can be a real pain. I don't mean the water's too hot or somebody's left bleach in the bowl or the priest's gripping you so tight it's really starting to hurt because mum's dressed you in the super-slippery silk baptism gown and fonts are made out of very hard stone and he's really scared of dropping you. No I mean the pain of someone else's baptism. When all the strange people come to church, and they don't know what they're supposed to be doing in the service and most of them don't care anyway, and they've either not bothered to turn off their mobile phones or they're using them to film the proceedings, and some of them turn up at the end of the service and a few of them keep popping out every 15 minutes to have a smoke, best not to ask of what. And then having thoroughly disrupted our usual Sunday service, we never see them again. No denying it, all that stuff can be a pain. But then think of the gift that's been given. They might not recognise it for what it is, they might not seem very grateful, but they've taken that gift nonetheless. Yes. One up for us. Victory. That can only be a

cause for happiness. One more occasion on which Christianity's central message of *joy* has been proclaimed.

The church-not just this one but every one- is packed to the rafters with sinners: always has been, always will be, and there's nothing in your life that you can have done that is so big and so awful that it can prevent you from coming through those doors. Once we've admitted that fact and got over it, we can move on to more important things. There's a point- quickly reached- beyond which it serves no useful purpose to remind us of how bad we can be. But it is never pointless to proclaim how good God is.