

Fr Andrew Fenby

My mind is— I know— pulled magnetically to the facetious. Partly, this is because life is completely absurd. Just look who's leading the western world. Partly it's a defensive measure- the dents of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune are more bearable sporting a red nose and maybe, just maybe the bully boys are less likely to hit you if you're making them laugh.

Life is undeniably absurd and try as I might I can't really seem to forget it. I haven't tried media blackout complete isolation sensory deprivation yet, which would filter out the main sources of farce for a while until, but stuck with just myself, I would soon realise how silly I was being, and off we go round the merrygoround once more. There is really no escape. The default to jocose doesn't even stop when I step into the hallowed vaults of a church. How could it? Look at us! Or maybe just look at me- I'd rather you didn't, but it comes with the job- look at me wearing a black dress, nightie and sequined poncho. All at the same time. Billy Porter, step down in shame. Alongside the solemnity and mystery and wonder and awe which are what you should hope for, if not expect, in God's house, there is also when we come to worship, because we are humans, immense silliness. With so much to get right, so much on the line, so much of such importance balancing on the next hour, it's no wonder we want to giggle.

Face it. If we could actually see the saints and angels in what we think are empty pews, if we could perceive with our senses earth and heaven intersecting on that

altar, if we could vividly feel ourselves partaking of the life of God when we have communion... ...we'd be way too scared (nice new doors or not) to ever set foot in this place. If we did from the reserves of our strength scrape together the courage to step in, we'd be shivering in a back pew, not from the draught, but paralysed with fear.

It follows then, paradoxically, that having your tongue firmly lodged in your cheek when contemplating all things church means you are able to take it more seriously. Sometimes the only way you can even consider approaching the throne of grace is in a jester's costume. That's my excuse anyway, and I'm sticking to it.

Just before the Epiphany Carol service last week my ever-active frivolity lobe was pondering the idea of Cockney (or in my case Mockney) Church. What do you reckon?

East End Evensong? Maybe Music Hall Mass. As the long-suffering trebles who sat through a year of my accompaniment at rehearsals can tell you, if you want honky tonk slightly- ok massively- out of tune pub piano, I'm your man. And once I've got the old Joanna rolling, we can all start singing.

'Hold your hand out naughty boy' for the confession & absolution obviously. 'Any old iron' when the collection plate is coming round. 'Where did you get that Hat' if the Bishop's visiting (it took a *lot* of whittling effort for me to say anything that

polite). Because we're Church of England we'll probably be singing 'I'm Henry the Eight I am' quite a bit or possibly 'It's a long way to Canterbury'. And if all else fails, you can't beat a rendition of 'Down at the old burning bush'.

If by now I haven't succeeded in offending everybody, there's one more music hall song to sing, a sad song- because all shows need a sad song- a Victorian ditty of anonymous authorship.

*She was poor, but she was honest,
Victim of a rich man's whim:
He promised her that he'd wed her,
And she gave him everything.*

There're quite a few more verses which you'll be relieved to know I won't sing for you, but they describe the heroine's nightmare descent from seduction to prostitution till finally we witness her body dragged out of the Thames after she's flung herself in despair from Westminster bridge into the icy depths. It's a striking tale. Although it deals in some depressingly misogynist period stereotypes, its main thrust is not to tut tut at the 'fallen' woman but to excoriate the heartless and unthinking rich men who have uncaringly wrought her ruin. The last verse runs:

*"It's the same the whole world over;
It's the poor that gets the blame,*

It's the rich that gets the pleasure.

Isn't it a blooming shame?'

The song builds up to that point, quite a sting in its tale, but it's not that vitriolic last verse that is the most shocking thing about this song. It's the very first line.

She was poor, but she was honest.

She was poor, *but* she was *honest*? Are we saying that poverty is some sort of moral failing along the lines of, or even the same as dishonesty? It would be easy here just to see Victorian prejudice against the poor, which it certainly is. But that's not unique to the nineteenth century. We've not exactly stopped. Demonising, distrust and contempt for the poor is so pervasive, so inescapable, we all unthinkingly buy into it—even if we ourselves are just scraping enough to get by. Think of all the negativity our contemporary culture loads onto the phrases 'benefits claimants' or 'economic migrants.' There's millennia of abuse before that. As long as there've been people who have more there've been people dehumanising those who have less.

So, so, so. Why does this matter to Christians? What has this got to do with the feast of Candlemas we celebrate today? Let's have a look at what's going on in the Gospel reading for this day.

Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to 'do for him what was customary under the law'. It's not clear which specific law Luke is referring to- he seems to be describing a mix of rituals. That's not necessarily implausible, no more so than the C of E all in one Wedding and Christening service. Presentation of the firstborn is definitely in the mix, but what mostly seems to be happening is the rite of the purification of a woman after childbirth. According to Leviticus, a woman is ritually 'unclean' after giving birth (you see, misogyny was not a Victorian invention). So she must undergo a period of purification: 33 days if she a male child, 66 if she'd had a daughter (you see misogyny was not...). To mark the end of the cleansing, a visit to the priest was in order, a prescribed sacrifice would be offered, and then the new mother would have fulfilled her religious obligations and could re-emerge ritually cleansed into the world. So far, so archaic. But this is where, for us, it gets interesting, because if we go to the relevant section of the book of Leviticus there we will read:

When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean... ... If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering

Did you notice? St Luke's gospel tells us the sacrifice Joseph and Mary brought:

they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Mary and Joseph could not afford a sheep. They brought the sacrifice of the poor.

Let us try to put ourselves back into the world this story first appeared in. It's not as easy as we might imagine: we've had a good millennium and a half of Christian cultural hegemony singing with the poor and meek and lowly, and so we imagine that people have always thought like we do, but they certainly haven't. Despite Luke's sleek Greek prose, back in the first century when this Gospel would have been written, the tale would have seemed completely ridiculous.

Unlike us today, those stories of miracles wouldn't have troubled the first century mind overly. Nor with a bit of imaginative effort would the virgin birth. With a bit more work you can get over God being born as a human, and born as a Jewish one as that, but pretty much impossible to get is the preposterous suggestion that the saviour of the world was poor. Because poor people, then as now— but much more so then— just didn't count. If God was going to have a son, he could not be poor. Poor people didn't figure. They didn't have rights- might was right- and the poorest of them all- a hefty chunk of the population of the Roman empire- didn't even own themselves: they were slaves.

When the Magi came, they first dropped off at the palace. I mean you don't find the special people anywhere else. If there hadn't been that star, they would never, but never, have gone searching in the Bethlehem slums. The very notion would have been ridiculous. Ridiculous. But that was where they found Jesus.

Jesus' birth, is not the end of the ridiculous. His death is pure farce. He was executed. As a criminal. Not even a decent citizen's execution, beheaded like St Paul. No. Crucified. Crucifixion was only used for slaves. The lowest of the low, the poorest of the poor, those did not even own themselves. You cannot expect anybody to believe that that man was God's son. You're being facetious.

They were wrong, so wrong, about the poor back then. We know better, we do not have their excuse. Christianity is not a top-down faith. It is a faith that goes from the bottom, up. Ours is not a faith about caring for the poor, it *is* the poor. The poor are always with us, because Jesus is. The road to Heaven always starts in the gutter.

Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God.