

With all the high drama of the Labour party conference last week it's predictable that the television newsreels featured interview after interview with those on the redder side of the political spectrum. They arrived with the pre-written story- the ghost of Corbyn past clinking its chains and ran with it.

Occasionally last week shadow cabinet members were interviewed not about the People's Front of Judea (no! we're the Judean People's Front) , but policies. Usually with such interviews, one watches, nods along at the agreeable lefty murmur and then forgets, such is the ephemeral nature of political discourse. One interview from last week's coverage bucked this trend and lodged itself firmly in my memory. Not because it comprised unforgettable political rhetoric, the recognisable first shot of the revolution, a speech to be quoted for generations to come, up there next to fighting them on the beaches with the heart and stomach of an English king. As a matter of fact, I can't even tell you which member of the shadow cabinet it was. That I think is excusable as she possibly wasn't entirely sure herself, and almost certainly had been doing a completely different job three days before the interview and has by now probably resigned. So not knowing the name is excusable. Alas, I can't tell you what she was being interviewed about either- it might have been grammar schools, but then it could have been the living wage. Or it might have been immigration or Labour's policy to deal with excessive numbers of urban squirrels. I just don't remember what this shadow minister said during her big moment news interview, because watching it, I was completely distracted by her lipstick. I know, I know. It wasn't one of those occasions when someone loses their glasses and applies lippy to half their face. The shadow minister for tree-dwelling rodents was wearing a lot of lipstick of an especially garish shade, but rather than sporting a myopic clown's cherry bow, her lipstick finished each side a centimetre or so before her lips did, as if she'd run out of enthusiasm halfway through, or decided she wanted to look permanently slightly surprised, or had always wanted a much smaller mouth but didn't fancy the surgery. Completely, utterly distracting and an important lesson all politicians should learn about getting your slap right if you want someone to pay attention to what you're saying.

I know I'm more than a little odd, but it's not just me whose attention will be hooked by next to nothing, superglued to superficialities, pinned to the peripheral. You just can't take in what someone is saying when they have a little blob of shaving foam left under the ear, a seed trapped in the hair spray, gravy on their blouse or a shirt sporting the mucus that missed the tissue.

I'm 100 per cent certain that's what Boris Johnson's hair is about- an outrageous Wurzel Gummidge nesting atop his privileged face to distract you from the odious bilge coming out of his mouth. Same Teresa May's shoes, or even the entire Foreign Secretary- a cunning plan to distract the world from the alarming fact that the government is a chicken without a head and without a clue.

That those little things like seeds and shaving foam are out of place helps to make them so impossible to ignore, but that isn't the whole story by any means. We are humans. It is the trivial, the circumstantial, the irrelevant but colourful, that grabs our attention and won't let go. The important stuff, the crucial central essentials can go figure: gossipy frippery is just so much more likely to grab you by the eyes and refuse to let go.

Think about what you remember of the past. Your memories will be, yes, of the big stuff, and then lots and lots of irrelevant detail: the mood of a September afternoon thirty years ago, a particular pair of shoes you once wouldn't be seen out of, that tune on the radio, the pattern on the curtains in your bedroom, the way the sunlight hit the carpet when you heard the news.

We are humans. It is the trivial and the trifling, the circumstantial and colourful that have the sharpest hooks and the strongest hold. This is how you can tell that the Bible- and especially the New Testament- was written by humans: by the obsessional inclusion of trivia, the love of local colour, the infatuation with irrelevant details and the addiction to gossip.

Sometimes this sort of stuff- what colour the dress was, or what the weather was like- is rich with symbolism or even irony: mostly it isn't, it is just trivia. So do we really need to know that before the stilling of the storm Jesus was sleeping on a cushion? That a young man ran away naked from the garden of Gethsemane? That Joanna- who she? was the wife of Herod's steward Chuza- who he? That Simon of Cyrene not only carried the Cross but was also, the father of Alexander and Rufus? That that formerly blind beggar had a name- Bartimeus and so did his father- Timaeus, and when the 5000 were fed we had that many fish (who had faces but not names) and that many of this sort of loaves? Is it essential to the tale to know that Zaccheus didn't just climb any old tree to see Jesus but a sycamore? Of course it couldn't have been a monkey puzzle or a bonsai tree, but why bother to remember — that it was a sycamore? Sycamores were not symbolic before Zaccheus climbed one, unless you count old Testament prophet Amos dressing them, which is a pretty bizarre pastime if you ask me. The Bible includes all this stuff- the names of cameo

characters, the species of tree, the type of bread, the figurehead on the ship that took Paul to Syracuse- because... that's just what humans are like, and that's just the sort of stuff humans like and that inessential colour is how the stories become more vivid, memorable, meaningful and important to us.

When you notice that, that's how you can tell the Bible was written by humans.

Also, a pretty good clue is that the Bible is a *book*, not a 10 meter high black obsidian obelisk or a tablet of flaming gold or something written in the amplitude of the waves of the ocean or carved on the back of a small beetle scuttling under a leaf in the Amazonian rain forest.

And it's written like that because in the incarnation God became human in Jesus. It's written like that because the God who meets us where we are that first Christmas day- as well as keeping an eye on the gentle curves of space, the grinding orbits of the cosmic spheres, and whatever lives in the rotting biomass on the forest floor- is obsessively concerned with other humans, as all human beings are. Fully divine and fully human.

To know that obsessive concern, we simply have to look at Jesus' ministry on earth and see that nothing human was too small, nobody was too irrelevant or circumstantial for his attention. 'Hey, I'm God incarnate- don't worry me about that!' Only at the very beginning and the very end does Jesus meet with the bigwigs: the kings, the governors, the high priests. The rest of the time it's the nobodies that get all of Jesus's attention: children and women, beggars and lepers, the sick and the bereaved, fishermen, provincial tax collectors and Peter's mother in law. When it came to people, Jesus had excellent peripheral vision. The most highest-ranking person Jesus meets on his treks through provincial Palestine is a centurion with a somewhat Roman devotion to his sick slave. Not exactly the top of the A-list. But that's who Jesus chose to spend his time with. The unnoticed and the unimportant; the trivial and the forgotten. Those who were nothing, were everything. That, at ground level, is what incarnation actually means.

Now I wouldn't want you to go away this evening thinking that I've been suggesting that obsession with trivia is a good thing - it isn't, particularly at a PCC meeting. And I'm not suggesting that God is small minded or that we need to dignify the smallest of our obsessions with God's omniscient attention: indeed, not a sparrow is

forgotten in God's sight, but possibly he's not over concerned with our lipstick or whether we're going to get a parking space.

What I want you to ponder, is that the fact that somebody bothered to record the kind of tree somebody once climbed in order to see Jesus, tells us something very important about our God. And what that titbit of trivia tells us is that salvation has indeed come to this human house.