

If the only remarkable think about Komol Panyasophonlert was the tongue twisting effect pronouncing his name has on Anglophone speakers he would not really be worthy enough of note to be the opening act in a St Mary's sermon not even on a desperate for what to say day. Most of the people in the world have names that will trip up the unfamiliar. No, far more impressive by half, the Bangkok computer programmer with that name became, at 31 years old, the world's third best Scrabble player. Officially. You may not be impressed. I mean, third is bronze medal position. It's Tom Daley's pumps on the podium, except this is nerd-alert Scrabble so there is not even the compensations of a buff body and speedos. Unless the board game was being played at the strange sort of swinging party that was fashionable in 70s Surbiton. In which case, for all I know, swimwear may well have been wrapped up with the double word scores. But enough of the Surrey of your youth. You may not be impressed by Komol's achievement but I am, because he has reached the giddy heights of Scrabble Stardom despite speaking scarcely one word of English. As international Scrabble is always played in English, that, you would have to admit, is pretty impressive.

Now just in case you've spent the day inadvertently absorbing poisonous emanations from sitting too close to a copy of the Mail on Sunday, let me assure you that it is not because the EU has been plotting with trendy lefty teachers to drag down standards in British schools that somebody who speaks almost no English has beat us all to becoming the world's third best scrabble player. It's not that standards of English have fallen so low that even the Mail looks intellectual. Nothing to do with plummetting literacy in native speakers, so no need to bring back the 11 plus. And teh birch. And National Service. Komol Panyasophonlert, in order to achieve his remarkable feat, has simply memorised the English dictionary, reading it for up to 6 hours each day. He doesn't have a clue what any of it actually *means*, but he knows what points it will get him if he lays it on a triple word score square. Which makes him one up on the Mail.

Still, it didn't really need that heartwarming tale of a brainy bloke from Bangkok to alert us to what I am certain any school teacher would readily affirm, which is that as humans we have a seemingly infinite capacity to memorise without understanding, a default setting to store without processing, and an alarming habit of merrily filing it away without actually taking any of it in.

And- shh! don't let the teacher hear- in much human endeavour it doesn't really matter. If you speed-scan the latest Diocesan missive before filing it in the wastepaper basket 99.9 times out of a hundred you will have missed nothing of note;

if you take that copy of the Mail from the paper boy and put it straight in the recycling bin without reading it first you will have missed nothing of note; if you sit smiling and nodding through the sermon all the while thinking about the latest scandal to emerge from some B-list celeb's messy cabin fever divorce without actually listening to a word he's saying you will have missed... hold on. If you memorise the contents of the OED in order to be a world-ranking board game player, it doesn't really matter if you don't understand the meaning of the words. In much human endeavour it doesn't really matter if you haven't taken it in.

But in some human endeavours, it does matter that you understand: some times you have to actually know what you are talking about before opening your mouth: some things have to be chewed and savoured they cannot be devoured in chunks or swallowed whole.

A computer, for example, is perfectly capable of playing music. It can be programmed to play a piece of music, to play exactly the same notes as a human would- all the right notes in precisely the right order- probably closer to the marks the composer daubed on the manuscript than any human ever could, and yet when you do that, when the computer plays the music, it does not sound right. You have inputted, it has outputted and it has not understood. Occasionally musicians can be like this too: they play brilliantly, but they play like a machine, and not just when they're playing Bach. There is something about music which absolutely requires an engagement with the content not simply its regurgitation, an understanding that is deeper than mere surface brilliance. The same could be said for acting or painting or any of the arts; also for less easily defined endeavours such as listening sympathetically or having a conversation - nobody will want to talk to you once it gets round that you don't actually take in a word they're saying. And, yes, it doesn't matter if you read the Daily Mail without really taking it in- in fact you're probably a better person for it- but it does matter if you take this approach to the Bible.

It is entirely possible to be extremely well read in the scriptures, to have learnt them by heart, to be able to quote any chapter and verse on any occasion, to have read the Bible every single day of your life without fail and not have a clue what any of it actually means.

You may have met someone who has achieved these fantastic feats, who will try to batter you into believing by an unrelenting stream of Bible quotes. The effect is like being talked at by a sewing machine. Rat a ta ta ta ta tat. You might even be guilty, in a

small way perhaps, just occasionally, of having gone there, once in a while, yourself. It's easily done. The Bible is easily read. There are more copies of that book in the world than any other, even Harry Potter. And there are myriad English editions of the Bible many deliberately translated so as to make it as easy for you to read as possible. Some even have pictures. The Bible is easily read.

But if God is not in your heart when you read it; if God is not in your life when you read it... Rat a ta ta ta tat.

How easy it can be to look and not perceive, to listen and not understand

Now don't get me wrong. Reading the Bible is a very good way to spend your time. It can also be a very good way to completely waste your time. Here, I would suggest, is how to avoid the latter. Don't read with your eyes- and certainly, don't read with someone else's eyes. Read with your heart. Yes, I know that's anatomically impossible and braille apart, reading involves use of the eyes. But I hope you know what I'm suggesting. Read the Bible as a way of praying; read the Bible listening for God to speak to you- not in the words written on the page, some of those are very worrying indeed, and some of them very silly- read the Bible with listening for God to speak to your open heart.

In St John's Gospel, Jesus says to the Pharisees:

*You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life*

You do not, you will not discover God in the Bible. It's not like that. You meet God first and then, when you are walking with him, on the road to Emmaus, heart aflame within, he opens your eyes to understand what is written there. Without that meeting first, wherever that may be, however that will have occurred, without that understanding that can only come by trying to love God. You've memorised the dictionary. Rat a ta ta ta tat.