

And they all lived happily ever after... You want more? We all love a happy ending. I thought that was all I needed to say & we could all go back early to what we were planning to do today- arguing with the significant other, queueing for two hours on a web site for an online delivery slot that never existed, working out how many meals you can make from half a bag of out of date split peas and your last pot noodle. However, turns out you *do* want more than a happy ending otherwise you'd have fast forwarded the sound file by now. So. Where was I?

We all love a happy ending. In the scariest movie the baddies are eventually defeated; even the bleakest director usually gives his film a bit of a lift at the end, we can always trust Hollywood to the world put to rights. Yes, sometimes the script writer has to get the plot into all sorts of implausible contortions to make it happy, but we get there eventually.

We *do* really love a happy ending. Before the wider world opened our gastronomic eyes we were content to plough through the abominations of British cuisine, because dinner always ended with dessert : how many meals of liver and onions have been laboriously consumed solely because there is trifle at the end? No matter how fashionable & interesting it might be to be glum, who doesn't secretly long a happy ending?

Forget furiously chasing the latest trends in youth culture, forget the ever more frantic search of a mediaeval institution for contemporary relevance, it could well be

that missing the happy ending is one of the ways in which the Christian church is genuinely out of touch with everybody else.

Let's face it, Christians, can often appear to be not a very happy lot. If they are not beating their breasts and acknowledging and bewailing their manifold sins and wickedness (that's the Church of England), they're prancing round in lace practicing their po-faces (that's the Anglo-Catholics); if they're not enthusiastically telling you that you've got a one way ticket to the eternal fires and 'computer says no' it's too late to change the booking (that's the Protestants), they're to be found, flail in hand busy practicing their self mortifications (that's, erm, Opus Dei).

It's not always been this way. According to Timothy Radcliffe, the former superior general of the Dominican order

*"For its first 1500 years mainstream Christianity shared the conviction that the principal reason for being a Christian was to be happy."*

When did we forget that?

Every summer, when the real news runs out and the country's youth are all happily in bed at night and there are no economic crises to fulminate about, British newspapers resort to all sorts of desperate expedients to fill their pages. One recurrent favourite is to report silly scientific announcements, though for some reason the Express reports them all year round. You must know the sort of thing I mean: scientists at the University of Beddington have proved that you really do go to

sleep quicker if you close your eyes, or researchers at Wallington Institute claim to have found the scientifically best method of wrapping fish and chips. When the real news runs out, the silly science starts.

About five years ago *The Times* featured a story of this type, rather gentle and not completely spurious- it was the Times after all, when they reported that scientists believed they had found out who was the happiest person who had ever lived. This wasn't the winner of some unfeasibly large Euromillions jackpot. It wasn't someone who was the most popular person in their school, work, office or neighbourhood. It wasn't even the winner Britain's Got Talent. It was a man who lived, in England, in the seventeenth century, a cheerie chappie by the unremarkable name of Thomas Traherne. You would think that even the Times had really hit the silly season when they went on to report that this happiest person was of all time spent all his adult life as a Church of England priest.

On paper, Thomas Traherne should not have been a terribly happy bunny. First of all, as noted earlier, he was an Anglican Priest. Of course the vicar's lot has not always been a stressful one, and the Parish Share Allocation wasn't invented till the late 20th century, but 350 years ago religion was literally a life and death matter and the Revd Traherne had lived through that period of English history that would make anything less than the Peasant's Revolt seem like a bit of froth on a drink of pop, the period of the English Civil War and Commonwealth. To make matters worse, Thomas Traherne was on the losing side and the winners were *par excellence* the type of Christians who were determined to wipe the smile off your face. After they'd removed the

King's grin by forcibly detaching his head, Cromwell's puritans, you may recall from school history lessons, had closed down the theatres & pubs, banned football, dancing and anything else that wasn't, in their eyes, godly and sober including the Church of England, and, incredibly, mystifyingly, jawdroppingly, gobsmackingly, achieved the ultimate desire of killjoys everywhere, and abolished Christmas. So you wouldn't really expect Thomas Traherne living in those times to be a happy man.

But he was. Thomas was a C of E priest, a moderately talented poet and a radiantly joyful man. And he was happy because it seems for him that every moment he was very consciously unwrapping one of God's gifts, for him every minute was that moment of delight when you remove the wrapping paper, his whole life, one, long happy ending.

God wasn't being especially nice to Thomas, we all get just as many gifts from God. It's just that he was better at noticing.

So not only can Christians be happy, they can be the happiest people of all. We know this, thanks not only to Thomas Traherne, but because today we celebrate the first Mass of Easter. Easter. Christ risen from the dead. The resurrection of our our Lord. That *is* a reason for happiness.

Today it's time to stop putting in the boot & put on our party shoes. Welcome to the resurrection.