

Fifty years ago the sweet shop was the focus of a good many childhood desires. Simpler times. In the days before ADHD, five a day and Jamie Oliver, in the days when the most desired toy was ‘clackers’ tempered glass spheres attached to string that gifted a small child the equivalent of snooker balls in a sock before they eventually shattered, sending glass shards into the face of the user and anyone nearby; in the days when asbestos was considered to be the suitable material for building schools; the days when health food was Lucozade and glucose powder, in such a milieu almost anything in a sweet shop was parentally approved for consumption. And no, I’ve not been sitting too near to a copy of the Daily Mail again: I don’t think this state of affairs was *good*; it wasn’t, but it was how it was. In the 1970s sweet shops largely peddled substances now all unseen outside weapons research establishments: chews that would dye your gums black for weeks, sherbet that would rot a hole in your front teeth –while you watched– a powder which fizzed, crackled and popped on your tongue. Most sweet shops also sold cigarettes to anyone out of shorts– or over the age of 5 in parts of Lancashire I believe. All were unremarkable pocket-money purchases.

But not bubblegum. Not bubblegum. Bubble gum met with stern parental disapproval on mysterious and always unspecified grounds. Perhaps if pressed a parent might mutter something about the terrible mess if it got on your clothes or in your hair but all children knew differently. Nothing would stick to crimpolene after all. The truth, as any child could tell you was the surprisingly commonplace sinister notion that if swallowed the apparently harmless pink goo would knot itself round your intestines and kill. Needless to say, it was therefore the most sought-after delicacy among East Leeds children; swallowing a mouthful of bubblegum a rite of passage of daring second to none. (until you started smoking aged 5 that is).

This is not however a sermon that will draw parallels between the attractiveness of forbidden sweets and adult sins, tempting though that may be to deliver. In fact the metaphorical temptations of bubblegum are not on the radar today. It is what accompanied each strip of forbidden pink tooth-rot that is of interest. Because, thanks to the miracles of miniaturisation each packet of bubblegum came with a small mail-order booklet of things you could, if you spent a long time saving your pocket money, send off and buy. Perhaps in the richer South children could afford what was offered in the book: such things as the world’s most efficient pocket catapult or a guaranteed electric handshake: perhaps children were a little less sophisticated up in the West Riding, but for them, this Aladdin's cave of mail-order mischief was the handbook of desire.

Now of course people had catapults, if inferior ones to those in the catalogue, even joke shop handshake buzzers were not unknown and failing that a bit of sellotape and a drawing pin; but nobody had ever been known to possess what was easily the most desirable and exotic thing the Acme Bubblegum and Toy Company catalogue offered for sale: X-Ray specs. In the days before effective trades description legislation, these instruments promised to allow you to see through walls, through book covers- useful in exams-, inside bags and what wasn't offered but what of course, most appealed to the almost- adolescent imagination, through clothing.

One of the few compensations of middle age is you can finally buy the things you were forbidden in childhood- dogs, Doc Martens, pink ballet shoes... maybe not the last one. So... Let's see. Fresh out of the packet.

It was all nonsense of course. And even if such a thing did exist, and work, you would undoubtedly end up being less than thrilled seeing the contents of everybody's stomach or worse, spending your life in a medical text book. But let us for a moment regain childish credulity and imagine such things really do exist. However you looked at the world with X-Ray specs on it would look very, very different. It would be the same world you are interacting with, perceiving, moving in as those without the benefit of your advanced technology but you would be seeing something very different indeed. You would no longer see the world as most other people do.

Such of course (here comes the tenuous link) is Christian faith. Our faith is a filter through which we view the world. Not X-ray but F-Ray (sorry, I know it's cringe) specs that allow us to see the realities, the inner working of this world, the truth of a situation which may well be very, very different from its appearance.

Let's face it. Without our F-ray spec, what we are doing here today is very silly indeed.

Saying alleluia a lot. Listening to the priest rattling along the same old track, hacking away at the same old themes. Kneeling to eat a tiny piece of tasteless bread and a small- stingingly small sip of wine. Sitting. Standing. Kneeling. Standing. Sitting. Standing. It's not even good entertainment: there's probably something better on TV even at this time on a Sunday. All very silly indeed

You may not know it but your neighbours and friends know it: you are different. As they say in Yorkshire 'Tha's a bit queer'. Well they used to say it to me. You are not quite like your neighbours and friends. Appearances are deceptive: you look the same but there are many subtle differences. You are not quite like them.

You are fools. Just look at you.

When that water splashed on your head, probably when you were an infant and before you realised what was happening and started screaming, when that happened, something took. That was the start of the foolishness. And here you are today right in the middle of just one more in a long line of many foolish acts. Here you are at the culmination of a week celebrating the most foolish thing of all. Look at him. Your God, a dead man hammered onto two pieces of wood. Fools!

You know different. Foolish and weak we are. But you trust your shepherd, you know his voice. And your perspective of faith, your X-ray specs, let you see something quite different; you see as the saints of 2000 years of faith see, you see as the ranks of angels see, you see as heaven sees.

*“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong”*

What you see, what the saints, the angels, what heaven sees, is not empty ritual, meaningless gestures, childish belief in magical deities but love. With a capital L. The love of one man for the world. One man laying down his life for his friends. One man laying down his life for all humanity. There is no greater human love than this.

And then today we see one man raised from the dead to life everlasting; one man whose death and resurrection destroys death; the shepherd who leads his sheep where he has gone; we see the final rejection of humanity turned into the final acceptance of God, we see the Love of God transforming the all too human cruelty of Calvary, into the heavenly joy of Easter. There is no greater love than this.

*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

That's today that is. Happy Easter.