

Fr Andrew Fenby

The British newspapers are, it has to be said, barely worth reading. In the 21st century they are both a shadow of their former selves and an institution whose time of usefulness has long gone. Riding on the wave of the enlightenment information superhighway that was the printing press, for good and ill for centuries they have shaped and shackled the public imagination, held those in power to account and misused their own power for prurient entertainment and extremist political agendas. Newspaper readership is, however, dwindling. You can't even give the things away, and it won't be long before both tabloid and broadsheet will be performing their last useful function lining the great cat litter tray in the sky. Although nostalgia is always seductive, I don't think they will be greatly missed: their time has been called successively and ever more urgently by radio, television and finally the internet. The regional press has already pretty much gone: all the local interest, confected outrage, salacious shaming and malodorous opinions they used to harbour have quickly migrated to Facebook. The national press cannot be far behind. Whether the old Muckraker will predecease his rags only time will tell, but the ends of both will surely not be far apart.

As I said, I don't think we'll really mourn their passing, but there will be something lost, because when all our news comes to us online, it will be so micro-tailored to our needs, interests and prejudices that we will be very unlikely to be exposed to those random items that sometimes catch our eye, those quirky little tales we wouldn't have sought out to read but we sometimes chanced upon simply because the newspapers were casting their net far and wide for copy and printing a scattergun of stories as they tried to appeal to as wide a selection of readers as they could. Stories like the following, which was appeared in some local papers in September last year:

“Missing woman mystery solved”

A group of tourists spent hours on Saturday night looking for a missing woman near Iceland's Eldgja canyon, only to find her among the search party.

The group was travelling through Iceland on a tour bus and stopped near a volcanic canyon. Soon, there was word of a missing passenger. The woman, who had changed clothes, didn't recognise the description of herself and joined in the search.

But the search was called off at about 3am when it became clear the missing woman was, in fact, accounted for and searching for herself.

Aside from any comic potential, in three short paragraphs, there is so much this anecdote can tell us, good and bad, about human life. On the plus side, when a person was noticed missing, the fun stopped and the searching began. Each human life was precious enough that people stopped and searched. People also noticed that someone who they thought should be there wasn't. This person wasn't, presumably, related to the others on the tour- after all you would have thought they'd have been recognised otherwise: you don't suddenly cease to recognise your sister if she changes her dress or your friend when they put their waterproof on. Having said that you frequently don't recognise me without my dog collar on: the things I witness... But, that the party stopped and looked for the one out of hundred that had strayed is a big plus for humanity.

Fewer bragging rights accrue for our lack of observational skills. The woman changed her clothes: presumably she didn't change into a full body and face costume or change everything else about her appearance at the same time, so it's not great that others in her party only saw her red anorak (or dungarees or little black dress or whatever it was she was wearing) and not her face... or voice... or any further than her fashion choices. Equally unimpressive were descriptive powers so poor that even the person didn't recognise herself from the profile, though there is the possibility that she had appalling self-awareness and didn't recognise herself when it was announced that the party had lost a short dumpy woman with ill-fitting clothes, blotchy complexion and bad breath- or a tall, slim stunning supermodel... in a red anorak. However she was described, it wasn't what she saw when she looked in the mirror.

Which in the end has enabled us to make the delightful and deep observation that, like so many in this New Age, she was searching for herself, but ultimately turned up nothing.

There is my cue to breathlessly sweep from the specific to the general, from a bus trip in Iceland to the universal search for integrity and identity, for truth and the true self. It's a feeling, a yearning, so many have. The feeling that there is a real 'us' somewhere to be found, that the 'us' that is here, living our lives, is not always or at least wholly the 'real' me. Somewhere, there is the real me to be found: my essential self, stripped of ego and worry and distraction, if only I had the time to stop and find it. The feeling can be strong; it's certainly common; it leads people to climb mountains and grasp crystals, leads them up to heights of creative energy and down to destructive addiction. Though the desire is real enough, it can never be satisfied,

because that search is as circular a wild goose chase as the coach trip canyon panic. The search for the self is a red herring. The urge to seek is real enough: the craving for the answer is strong enough: but the magnetic pull of our yearning is not to ourselves, but to God.

St Augustine, towering theologian of Western Christianity has a lot to answer for; original sin, the negativity of the church to sexuality, the perverted theology of predestination. He was also a brilliant thinker and a perceptive psychologist, able to see clearly the connexions between the spiritual and the human mind. And so his most remembered words are also his truest:

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you

It's not us we're looking for, it's God.

The journey of the Magi- the three (or not) wise men (or kings or not) represents that search. Guided by a star they journeyed, searched and found. They found the Christ child, the God who had made them for himself, made flesh right in front of their eyes. They had it easier than us: a star is hard to miss, their journey ended with a tangible, palpable reality clear to their senses: although it was freighted in mystery and clouds of numinous incense, it was grounded in everyday reality- a mother, a child, a humble home. They knew where to search, and they knew when they had found.

For us it is not quite so easy. God made our hearts for him, so our hearts will search for Him. But the baby in the stable is long gone. Where do we find the Christ child? We find him in his Word, speaking in our hearts when we hear the Gospel proclaimed. He is not those words, they may not even be his words, but he comes to our hearts, enters into our story as we enter into his.

We find him at the altar, feeding our souls with his body and blood. He is not bread and wine, but he is mystically present in them. He communes beyond our senses, beyond our perception with our hearts in the eucharistic sacrament.

And we find him in each other, in our brothers and sisters. This is hard. We can't recognise somebody we've been sharing a coach trip with when they change their clothes. How then can we see recognise the Christ child in each other? It's hard, but we can. Animating each of us is that divine spark of the breath of God, in every

human being the Christ-like potential; whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters, we do to him.

Epiphany.

The time of searching, the time of finding.

Self-obsessed as we are we imagine that we are looking for ourselves.

That search will never end.

Unless we search for God.

Then, and only then, will we find the answer.