

Alfred Lord Tennyson- we're having a bit of culture after Kitchmas- Alfred Lord Tennyson may have been one of the greatest English poets of the 19th century, yet he was but at best an inconsistent psychologist. Which is fair enough you might say the clue's in the job title, but surely, poetry is not just expertise with metre and metaphor, it must speak to the deeper human state, which surely means insights into what makes us tick: aka psychology.

Anyway, when it comes to weighing up the id, ego and superego, Tennyson was, inconsistent. On the plus side, allowing for poetic license, Victorian prudery, ignorance of endocrinology and a touch of embarrassed understatement the line:

In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

is a fair enough approximation of the mental state of many a youthful male when the bees begin buzzing and the sap starts rising. Or something like that. You can tell I'm a psychologist not a poet. Sorry if spring will never be quite as innocent again. So, not bad on the agonies of adolescence.

But Tennyson's other feted couplet, from his most famous poem, is not going to be winning any prizes at the counselling competition, exhibiting as it does, an almost wilful misunderstanding of the human mind.

"Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all."

I suppose Tennyson might have been being super-subtle; quoting the line as one of those things we tell ourselves or others to make ourselves feel better even though we know they won't: plenty more fish in the sea, you were too good for him and so on, I'm sure he'll stop being a lying charlatan when he becomes PM. But that's expecting of Tennyson a 21st century ironic cynicism he's unlikely to have ever had. No, I think he was playing it straight down the line when he said it.

“Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.’

As noble sentiment perhaps as poetry might aspire to express; but divorced from the reality of human emotion which is always heart-wrenchingly gut-churningly tear-jerkingly emphatic that it’s better never to have had it at all than to find yourself losing it. We hate it when it slips from our grasp, when we turn round to find it no longer there; we loath the sinking feeling as it disappears down the grate, up in flames or off into the night, out of our grasp, never to return. Some spurned lovers will, it’s true, grasp tighter to the fading *billets-doux*, treasuring the cloud of ignorant bliss that surrounded them before they discovered he was a philandering, faithless, two-faced... Some will hold on to a memory, but most will take those love-letters, chop them up into tiny little pieces, mix them with ground glass, pour them into an envelope and post it to their erstwhile paramour. What the digital age is missing- you can’t really shred an email. And some spurned amours will go the full bunny boiler. Because...

We hate to lose. Not just in love. Sure, we treasure the things of the heart more than most, but time and again, we are loss averse: we much prefer not losing to winning. We will fight much harder to prevent something being taken away from us than we would fight to get it in the first place.

Although we generally like it, we can be indifferent about winning. It’s difficult to the point of impossible, however, for us to be neutral about losing. We hate to lose. Hate it. And worst of all is losing and then seeing somebody else take what we have lost. Ooh, ooh, ooh. It’s rubbing salt in the wounds, adding insult to injury.

So, Herod is just being human when the arrival of the Persians on camel backs looking for the new king he knew nothing about sends him into a panic. Just being human. His dynasty is fairly dodgy anyway- the crown didn’t arrive on his head because he was kind to animals and wanted world peace. There are lots and lots of people who hate that he has what he has and would love for him to lose it. Which is

a shame because he didn't put all the effort into getting where he is today just to lose it. Herod is human: he hates to lose. Alas, we know where that ends for the infant boys of Bethlehem. Herod is clearly willing for them to pay that price- perhaps that step into tyranny inured him when later he had his own son executed. And, well, you know. When Herod dies, he's still king. He doesn't lose his kingdom and he dies in his bed.

It is in unfortunate in some ways that Herod enters the Epiphany story, because, once we've got over wondering what the deep significance of gold, frankincense and myrrh is (possibly it's just what was left in the shops when they did their last minute Christmas shop), once we've got past the gifts its very easy for Herod and his howls of anguished loss, to dominate the tale. The baddies get our attention more than the goodies. It's inevitable.

Which, as I am sure you can guess I'm going to say, is a shame, because the main point of the Epiphany story is not loss, but gain. Immense, unimaginable, unfathomable gain. So much gain that everybody wins. Even Herod. Herod, poor small-minded, short-sighted Herod thinks this is a zero-sum game, but it's not. It's an unending multiplier. Herod thinks this is about the throne of a tiny backwater Roman puppet state. Whereas what this is about, is the Kingdom of God. Redemption, salvation, justice. And even Herod can be in on the offer.

The real gift of Epiphany is not gold or frankincense or and myrrh; but the God of Israel. Now given to all. For Jews. And Gentiles too. The whole world is invited to the feast.

As Christian tradition has developed, as our understanding has deepened, we've given the Magi identities from around the globe: our own crib set has white, black and Chinese wise men. Other representations are different, but the Magi are always diverse. Why?

Because the whole world is invited to the Epiphany feast. East. West. North. South. Rich and poor, kings and commoners, wise and foolish, all are invited. Even you and me. All invited, all included in the gift.

There is everything to gain. And best of all, there really is nothing to lose.