

It is a sobering thought that for most of us, 99.9999999% of what we say will never be remembered. It will be lost forever as soon as it leaves our mouths, our utterances as fleeting as the breath that propels them. We spend so much of our time speaking and somewhat less of it listening; we expend so much of our brain power trying to think of what to say next, of how to put the question, how say the right thing: so much time wondering what did they mean by that, why did she say that, what does that mean? All those words that encourage and comfort, cajole and hurry, hurt and wound, warn and scold, bind and tear; words of love, words of work, hard words, precious words, everyday words, bitter words; oaths, vows and promises, said and like rain on a river, gone. Onward from the moment we come into the world we are surrounded by words, spoken by others, then by ourselves, then written and read yet if it is posterity we have in mind, the sheer amount of time and effort we put into yattering and chattering, telling and yelling is just one colossal waste of effort. Even if they listened when we were here, not long after our tongues have fallen silent and we are gone, nobody will remember a word of what we have said. If any of our words are going to be remembered it is likely to be our last ones.

We expect a story to have good ending and are disappointed if it tapers off inconclusively, if it becomes clear that the author lost interest or ran out of ideas; we want everything wrapped up in the film finale, not to find out towards the end that the production team ran so badly over budget they had to stop; we expect the symphony to end with a grand gesture, back in the home key, hammering it home, not fizzling out with some indecisive plinking and plonking. And so last words, of all the myriad millions of words we waste, are the ones most likely to be remembered

Even if, disappointingly, probably nobody has gone out of this world actually saying 'I wonder what happens if I press this' or 'Don't be silly, that's not a lion: you only get them in Cumbria', our final utterances run the gamut of our expressive capacities, from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the comic to the tragic.

'Et tu Brute?' 'Let not poor Nelly starve.' 'Kiss me Hardy' are the words from the lips of expiring emperors, kings and admirals that seem determined to linger: knowingly or not, many have been determined to have the last laugh—there's more on 'famous last words' in this month's parish magazine.

With one dubious exception, posterity has never seen fit to record anyone's first words. That exception was a little English boy who became a saint.

Down on the Romney marshes you can still see one of the last remaining churches dedicated to St Rumwald. There were never that many to start with: Rumwald's fame was local: perhaps European snobbery about its island cousins existed back in the seventh century, perhaps the continentals thought those the Brits were stretching credibility just a tiny soupçon too far this time. St Rumwald is unique in the panoply of saints, in that it is his first rather than last words that legend remembers. Rumwald's first words, spoken by him on the first day of his three-day life, the day of his birth, so legend tells us, were 'I am a Christian'. He then went on in the period of his brief baby life to request baptism and communion, and preach a sermon on the Trinity, which, like all sermons on the trinity, can't have been very good because nobody seems to have bothered to write it down. Gifted with a presentiment of his death, he directed that he should be buried in three different places- which must have really confused the sexton- and then expired without a word.

Twenty-first century sceptics, we know that tale is not true, not because it tells of a newborn baby talking-nothing is beyond God after all- but because of what it tells us Rumwald's first words were. You see, outside of invented stories about saints, everybody's first words are the same, which is why nobody bothers to write them down. Never witty, or clever, or comic, we all enter the world saying this "Waaagh!"

Whatever other words will come from our mouths during our lives, that primordial scream- of shock, of need, of presentient pain- is perhaps the most profound thing we will ever say. Our lives start with a cry swiftly followed by tears. That wail of the new born is reflex, ignorant if you like, but it is almost as if the infant has insight: nature itself gives us a foretaste of what lies ahead for us. Let's face it: this life is a vale of tears: it starts that way, it ends that way: and it will still be that way despite all the skills we have developed to ignore it, all the distractions we have built to delude ourselves, the good things that do happen to us that make us carry on and sometimes smile. Life's a bitch: and then you die. Human life is toil and struggle, pain and hardship, the proverbial blood, sweat and tears. No surprise if we dedicate so much time to trying to forget and escape that fact.

Now it is a common misconception that one of the best ways of escaping the miseries of life is being a Christian, that somehow, with God on our side we will evade the lot of our non-believing neighbours, that our piety is our protection, that our holiness will hold back the worst of life and that God will bless us with a pain-free, poverty-free, worry-free life. I wish it were so. My

job would certainly be a lot easier: just a matter of unlocking the doors and watching them flood in.

Sorry to say, this life is a vale of tears if you have seen the light, you have invited Jesus into your life and you have faith to move mountains. Perhaps even more so than if we had spent all our lives ignorant of our Saviour. When we see the light we also see the lies of this world for what they are, the ruler of this world for the sham he is. Not the best plan for popularity, not the best plan for an easy life.

In case you think I'm suffering a bad case of February blues, listen to the words of Jesus:

*'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'*

That is nothing easy we are being offered, no soft-option way out. Crosses hurt. Really hurt. If we want the name of Christian, we must take that cross.

OK. From now it starts to get better.

*For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it*

*those who want to save their life will lose it*

All the ways of getting on in the world, all our successes, all our struggles and striving to get on, to really count, to make our mark, to make ourselves proud. All that counts for nothing. No, worse than nothing. When we think we are gaining life, we are losing it. The more we have, the more we have lost. All those things we want- nice house, big car, fat bank account- are not signs of success, they are signs of failure.

*those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it*

On one level, we can understand this as a promise of eternal life for those who persevere in Christ, and so it is. But Jesus words also have an immediate meaning for us: not so much future rewards as here and now. When we truly believe in him, when we embrace Christ, hold tight and don't let go, it does

not change what happens to us in this world, but it does change what happens within us: our life *is* transformed... but from the inside, out.

It is not that with the eyes of faith we can see that the wood of our cross is an illusion: that cross is real enough. What our faith gives us is the knowledge that there is something more, something much, much more to our existence than the world of harsh material struggle, the knowledge that with Jesus comes the ultimate reality of creation and incarnation, passion and resurrection, and at the last ascension. Knowing that, changes everything.

Hold tight. Keep going. Never despair. There will be hard times in all lives, but that never means God has turned away. God is always there, even and especially when you fall. And He always, but always, has the last word.