

If you were to believe what you might read in such dubious organs as the Express the Mail or the Sun- and I hasten to add one really, really, really shouldn't believe what they print in there, but if temporarily we suspend disbelief we could try a thought experiment where we live in a world where if you wanted to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth you'd open a copy of the Mail, the Express or the Sun. In such a world you would most likely be under the impression that you live in a time where not only political correctness but also health and safety have gone mad. This world of press paranoia would be one where nannying busy-bodding spoilsport out to ruin your fun by making sure that there is no circumstance in which you might come to harm-ing is forced upon anybody just trying to do their job. So now we've all imagined that world into existence, please do not be alarmed. Just trying to do my job, I have done a risk assessment for this sermon. Although I can guarantee that there will be no flashing in it I am bound to warn you that it is about to become extremely pretentious. So I apologise in advance. This sermon is about to mention the work of French novelist Marcel Proust. Please forgive me and be assured that Take Me Out, Big Brother, mocking my in-laws and the stupidity of my dog will be back soon.

So, Proust and *In Search of Lost Time*, a book with a reputation that matches its outsize physical dimensions one that, despite being an avid bookworm, I had avoided for thirty years. Largely, this is because the only person I had met who had actually read the book said that its five thousand or so pages were given over to describing the narrator drinking a cup of tea. That and 'it changes the way you see the world'. Although I'm rather partial to a good strong brew, I'm not sure I'm so fond of caffeinated tannins that I want to read spend three months of my life reading about someone else drinking one. Equally, not till I was well into middle age did I decide that I didn't really care if the way I saw the world was changed, because it really couldn't be any worse than life had taught me it actually was.

So last year I set myself the task of reading *In Search of Lost Time* and- to save you the bother if you've not been there- I can report that it's not all about tea, and I've yet to see my view of the world changed, unless you count the time Wei-wei returned from the supermarket with a packet of madeleines. That was the cake that sparked Marcel's book when it was dipped in the said 5000 page cup of tea- and yes, what had previously been to me a pointless French cake was transformed into a literary reference which made me feel cultured for as long as it took him to finish the packet. But that's not much of a change of world view, it you can even call it that, just a slight increase in my already burgeoning capacity to be pretentious. The only other

point at which Proustian pretension has barged into my life comes from the other end of the book, in what is its final scene. There we meet the tea-soaked hero after a long disruption to his social life caused by the First World War, returning to one of the society parties that form the bulk of the preceding four and a half thousand pages. He finds himself completely discombobulated (I did warn you this was going to be pretentious) because firstly it turns out that the party is a fancy dress party and nobody had told him, and secondly, everybody he knows has come in the same fancy dress: as an old person. Grey wigs, wrinkle make up, even quavering voices, hobbling limbs and walking sticks. It takes him rather longer than it might you or me to realise that this isn't in fact fancy dress: time has moved on and everybody he knows- including himself- is now old. It's a vivid scene and one I found myself suddenly living this April at my mother's 80th birthday party. Who was that portly balding middle-aged bloke gate crashing the party? No I wasn't looking in the mirror, it was my younger cousin. And all those harassed looking twenty-somethings? They were the offspring of his baby sister. And there was Grandad, but wait, he died five years ago, and that shrivelled senior was actually my mother's younger brother. The venue was Suffolk not Paris; the smalltalk not French but equally foreign Northern; the guests retired milkmen and mechanics not barons and dukes, but there was life reflecting art, a Long Melford hotel transfigured, become *fin de siècle* France.

I know that's not strictly speaking changing the way you see the world, it's more seeing reflections of the literary in life, recognising the parallels between what we are experiencing and what someone else has written about. That can change your perspective, freight the ups and downs of life with meanings we might never otherwise guess, ennobling the most limited lives with an unimagined spark of significance.

And you don't have to spend months disappearing up your own... pretension to get this effect. Eastenders will do just as well, or the tittle tattle of Celeb Weekly, or maybe, must maybe if your stomach is strong enough, a Jeffrey Archer novel. Any of these watched or read and remembered can shed light on our experiences, give us a different angle, help us to grapple with the grinding gear changes of living.

This is why it can be a great thing if literature figures large in your faith. For all Christians (and Jews and Muslims) it does. We are indisputably a faith of the book. No church is without a copy of the Bible; no meeting of Christians proceeds without somebody- for better or worse- pulling out the good book.

Without the Bible our faith history would have been very different indeed.

However:

Christianity would still have happened. We'd still be gathered here today Bible or no Bible, still wishing the preacher would get a move on if nobody had bothered to write the gospels, still shifting uncomfortably in our pews if the only copy of the law and the prophets had fallen off the back of the donkey into the Red Sea, if Ezekiel had been given a prescription for Prozac and the recipients of Paul's letters has just binned them when they'd read them. We'd still be gathered here today. Because God was incarnate in real, human history, not as a character in a book. Yes, books massively aid the transmission of knowledge- in this instance our knowledge of God- but they are not that knowledge in the first place. They do, however, help us understand. So we receive the fullest benefit from being a scriptural faith when we start to understand the Bible not as a Highway Code for life (for which rôle it is signally unsuited) but as literature.

Not only might we recognise resonances of our own life when we are reading it, or better still hearing it read. We might also recognise elements of what we have heard in our lives when we are living them. This does happen. Of course, we are closer in culture and experience to twentieth century Paris than 1st century Palestine, but still, approached in the right way, the Scriptures can always come up with the goods. And that's because that book of books, that book of which there are more copies than any other in the world, that book translated into pretty much every conceivable language; that book so venerated, so studied, so imitated and influential. That book, is about God *and* that book is about us.

It is about how God comes into our lives, how we begin to recognise him in the faces of the people we meet and the words we speak, it's about hearing the complex counterpoint the melodies of *our* lives weave around the eternal *cantus firmus*, the song of the creator Word.

Most of the time the Bible does not speak to us directly. It does not address us in the tones of a headteacher ticking off naughty schoolchildren or cabin crew telling us the procedure to be followed in the event of an emergency or a street steward shouting down a megaphone or a magistrate reading the Riot Act. It can't. It's thousands of years too late for that. The way it speaks is a lot more subtle, and a lot more effective.

The Bible does not shout at us; rather it invites us in, to imagine ourselves the first hearers of that wisdom, reading the letters, walking in those shoes, eating those meals, seeing those sights. When we've been there, then we will start to see parallels and connexions, the ups and downs of our own lives saturated with meanings we never before saw, our lives fizzing and sparking with spiritual significance. We will start to see God not just in the obvious stuff like church services and stained glass and the lives of the saints, but everywhere- strolling in the park, making dinner, waiting at the bus stop, pushing a shopping trolley, trying to park the car, drinking tea, at a party: the whole world resonating with the Word.

Please note this is not the same thing as going through life occasionally pausing to think 'What does the Bible say I should do now?' If that's all we ask the Bible to do then we will be living on very meagre fare indeed, our faith a thin gruel that might just about keep us on our feet, and then again might not.

Rather, the Scriptures are teaching us how to hear the music of God, music we rarely if ever notice, music that is always playing, always all around us. When we know to listen for that music, we too will sing that song; when we have learned that rhythm, our feet will dance.