

It is a poor preacher indeed who has to fall back on quoting Monty Python films at the start of a sermon in order to raise a laugh, and though I'm pretty much run-of-the-mill in the rhetoric stakes and thus in need of all the help I can get, I'm not quite that desperate to raise a laugh. I'm also principally a realist and I know that 99 times out of 100 you're more likely to get a grimace than a guffaw out of the evensong crowd. And indeed calling you a 'crowd' is being optimistic, though I'm sure you could form yourselves into an unruly mob at the drop of a hat should you notice that I have inadvertently mispronounced some nugget of Tudor English.

Anyway, as I am now going to quote a bit of MP, I'm just warning you that it's because I want to use it to develop a point of theology, not to make you laugh. It's from 'The Galaxy Song' which appeared somewhere in the middle of the film *The Meaning of Life*

*So remember, when you're feeling very small and insecure,  
How amazingly unlikely is your birth,  
And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space,  
'Cause there's bugger all down here on Earth.*

Despite constant, copious amounts of evidence to the contrary, human beings are, all things being told a pretty intelligent lot. Compared to the rest of the animal kingdom we are sister swot and brother brainbox: take any random human and you can guarantee an IQ greater than a clam, an ant, an elephant, a wren, a whale, even a dolphin. Perhaps it was inevitable that as soon as we started to walk on two legs, we started to swagger. You know what they say about men with big brains.

However much we do differ in this respect from the other members of the animal (and vegetable and bacterial, viral and other kingdoms) this difference is not one of kind, but one of degree. With intelligence, we don't have something they don't have, we just have a lot more of it than them.

What we do have, which *does* seem to be unique in the earthly order is 'extelligence', our ability to accrue our intelligence rather than simply fritter it away amusing ourselves, keeping ourselves fed and increasing the chances of passing on our DNA. With extelligence we can keep what we've learned going after we've gone, we can use not just ours but everybody else's, we are able to

stand on the shoulders of giants and read the books they wrote when they were standing on the shoulders of giants who were standing on the shoulders of giants who were, on and on in regression again and again right back to the distant point where the very first person took up a writing stylus and let scribble. I know they used it first to write a bill, but from tiny acorns. Two heads are better than one, and with extelligence we've got millions. The genuine wisdom of the crowd.

At first our extelligence was scribbled or scratched on wax, papyrus, paper or vellum which meant it was great but limited: it kept knowledge handmade, localised and small. Though it incrementally increased it was also prone to sputtering and stuttering. All it took was one careless candle caper and there goes the library, gone for good. The dissemination of printing took it all to a new level, and meant we all became a *lot* more extelligent and a lot less prone to lose all our erudition in a freak wax accident. Scroll on to the internet, without doubt the latest part of human extelligence, even though parts of it seem to have finally separated from intelligence, such as the comments section on the Daily Mail web site which has clearly regressed to an earlier part of human evolution, the point just before our distant ancestors became slime at the bottom of a pond.

OK, what extelligence means, is that for the progress of the human project the written word is absolutely, crucially important, the one thing that guarantees that what we know will always grow.

Only what is recorded is remembered, which means that we really treasure the written word. Not only have we made our thoughts more lasting, more permanent and valued but also when we commit them to print we have in some indefinable way changed them, made them somehow more important, more substantial and more real. We can write it down, and so we treat it differently.

This is a phenomenon that can sometimes go awry: Donald Trump has a Twitter account after all. Slightly less likely to cause the end of the world than the current resident of the Whitehouse, but only just, is the dangerous situation that frequently arises when that written word is a religious one, because then words are not merely freighted with the significance that comes with being written down, but piled on top of that is the immense gravitas of holiness. To

paraphrase the M&S advert, these are not just words: these are God's words.

It's an unstable combination. One that for many reasons we need to take real care with. I've laboured long in sermons with some of the more obvious dangers of being people of the book- being selective, reading it wrong, making it into an idol- but what I want to briefly consider tonight is a less obvious issue, in that the extra gravitational pull of not-just-words-but-holy-words can, as we look for God in our lives, lead us to becoming lost in a maze of trivialities and missing the point, and just occasionally, and no matter how serious a tone we adopt, looking very silly indeed.

Here's an example. The precise route St Paul took on his final missionary journey to Rome probably fits under the category of 'trivial' but that toxic combination of religion and extelligence means that for two millennia now at least once a year some poor soul has to try to twist their tongue round some improbable Greek place names as St Luke regales us with a breathless postcard account of the trip:

*We sailed across the sea that is off Cilicia and Pamphilia, we came to Myra in Lycia.*

Stories are vitally important ways of communicating. The places on the journey have a narrative purpose: they add authenticity, colour, flavour, they help to make the story- there have to be dull bits in any tale in order to give the interesting bits their comparative zing. They need to be there. But.

As Christians, the Bible is essential to our faith *but* it is not our faith. It makes believing so much easier if we believe that all we need is in the good book, but it's not. And when we *do* get inside its covers, not all the words written in it have equal import. I defy you to tell me that 'Reaiah son of Shobal became the father of Jahath, and Jahath became the father of Ahumai and Lahad' is as important as 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. The different words in the different parts of the Bible will indeed have *different* weights and values, just as the kernel and the chaff have.

It is important for Christians to engage with the Scriptures. But we must actually *engage*, and the first step of that process is to engage our brains. The Scriptures contain both the Word and mere words. We must sift, test, challenge the words on the page so we can distinguish the words from the Word, one from the other. And never lose sight of the point of it all, the point of every single mark on every single page. The point of all those words is not the words themselves or the book they are collected in; the point is to draw us closer to God. Words can tell us very powerfully about God: but they are not even starting to scratch the surface of the reality that lies behind them.

However great the impact of written words has been on the human project; however central they are to our civilisation; however important they have been to the propagation of our faith, words have their limits and an end to their usefulness. Ultimately, all words are hot air and waste paper. If our hearts can grasp just the tiniest glimmer of the reality of God, words will cease to have any meaning at all.

*Fr Andrew Fenby 2017*