

'The past is a foreign country' may be a great way for L P Hartley to start a novel, but if that is the case, then I would have to say that I am a person who is signally averse to foreign travel. Not for me the excitement of boarding a flight to former times, no annual two weeks bathing in the always endless summer sun of yesteryear, no eagerness here to endorse my passport to the past. It's not because that country was a particularly harsh one for me, not that it's residents were especially hostile to this particular time traveller, not that the climate made me come out in a funny rash, not even that the food upset my digestion, which is no mean feat, growing up as I did in those twin gastronomic deserts of West Yorkshire and the 1970s. Toast toppers and vesta curries anyone? No, I am averse to that foreign land that is the past because it doesn't exist, and it ceased to exist the moment we travelled through it the first time round. Time is a one-way street, we can travel in one direction only: God knew this when he designed the human body: our eyes are in the front of our heads, not the back.

And so, I have never been to a school reunion. I mean, really, what is the point? Surely if you wanted to keep in touch you will someone, you will have done?. If somebody never returned the pencil you lent them to finish their homework, it can hardly be something you desperately want returned 20, 30, 40 years later, can it? So what is the point of a school reunion?

Well my guess is that the main point of a school reunion is to compare yourself with your peers and to come out on top.

She's so much more successful than me. But see how old she looks! I bet the last time she squeezed in anything smaller than a size 16 was the day she left school.

OK so everybody had a crush on him in sixth form, he's still looking good. But a career? I mean you can smell the bin juice from here.

I drive a Mercedes.

I married a model.

I've got 3 kids at university Ha! Ha! Ha!

Yes, the reunion is one long unedifying game of Top Trumps, even if the exams are long since sat, the secret is, you are back in school to compare and contrast.

Comparisons are odious, but it's drilled deep into our nature: we are the naked ape, and so it is inevitable that we are going to be the ape that compares.

Modern life is competitive and to compete we must compare. We must be compared with our colleagues, our neighbours, our siblings, our in-laws, our predecessors, our spouses. Modern life is scientific, and science means comparing; we must be compared with the control group, with the placebo group, with other species.

On most measures, I would, I hope, come out on top if I was compared with my dog.

More pleasant odour, certainly. Less public toilet habits, definitely. Even in my 'duh!' moments, more intelligent. Even more loyal: that famous dog attribute is infinitely negotiable: loyalty can be easily switched in the presence of a tasty treat, something to push temptation past the ability to resist, say a part decomposed rabbit, a discarded used tissue, anything that mere seconds ago was languishing in another creature's stomach.

So such delicacies may not tempt me to disloyalty, but one comparison in which my dog always comes out better than me is honesty. I'm not notably dishonest, but my dog is more honest than me.

Two ways: one, although I struggle with a poker face -usually my emotions can be read like an open book- at least I sometimes try to conceal, unlike Xin: dissembling is incredibly hard for a dog- not just a face to control but a tail too. He cannot cloke nor dissemble.

And secondly, Xin's response to you is always more honest than a human one, because it is determined by cupboard love. Cupboard love has a dirty name, but cupboard love is also blind. The hand that holds the biscuit can be black or white, young or old, gay or straight, who cares: it is holding the biscuit. The biscuit is all that matters. Biscuit = love. Cupboard love loves us not for what we are, but for what we've got to give. A dog's response to you may mercenary, unromantic, but always upfront and honest.

Humans respond to each other of course, in a much more complicated and often far less honest way. We *do* notice if the hand holding the biscuit is black or white, old or young, straight or gay, and whether we like it or not, whether we would want to admit it to ourselves or anyone else or not, that does sometimes change how much we want the biscuit. It might make that treat even more appealing; it might make us

want it less, whatever, when we enter the picture, it's no longer just about the biscuit. It's about all sorts of other things as well: cultures, habits, prejudices.

Perhaps this is why the Christian vision of God is so compelling, so attractive, so irresistible. It is a vision of God who will love us if we are black or white, young or old, gay or straight AND doesn't require us to be offering a biscuit in order to get that love. Doesn't get much better than that.

God's love may well seem to be so unconditional that it verges on illogical that the creator of well everything should be besotted with dust and ashes, this perfidious collection of corruption and corpuscles, the ungrateful, cruel, charmless and disobedient creature that is humanity.

Yes, God's love is unconditional but it is not indiscriminate, it is not blind. When God gazes at us, he not only sees past all those things that our vision cannot get beyond: age, race, gender etc., he also sees something in each of us that we *cannot* see except in the face of his Son. God is not loving something worthless. Quite the contrary.

The words of the medieval Persian poet Sa'adi, are quite beautiful:

'If a diamond falls in the dirt it is still a diamond;' he wrote 'Yet even if dust ascends all the way to heaven it still has no value'.

Well right about diamonds, but wrong about dust. Because the dust of Adam has indeed ascended to heaven and in that ascension, the ascension of Christ, has been transfigured and transformed. From dust, to diamond. When God looks at us and loves us God is not loving something worthless. He is seeing that diamond in the making. Everything in our behaviour suggests that we take a a dim view of our fellow humans. If we could see with God's vision, we would be dazzled.

Jesus is God. And Jesus is human. That much is basic Christian teaching. Easy enough to think that in that equation the only worthwhile bit is the godhead. But not so. In Christ, humanity is transformed, transfigured but still humanity. And here's the quite amazing thing: baptised into the Body of Christ, we all contain within us that transformation, Jesus leads where we would go, where he is, we too will be.

Look around you now, and see dust in the very process of becoming diamonds.