

Imagine if nobody ever finished the book. I don't mean never read a book to the end: it's a common enough habit to leave books half unread; my own bookcases are porcupines of half finished bookmarked books. No, imagine a world where authors laid down their pens after the first few chapters, or where printers got bored after the first 20 pages rolled off the presses. Imagine a Classic FM world full of trailers and tasters and no more, a world where no sooner had the song started than the DJ is yakking that it's time to hear this important message from our sponsors. With just the first few pages ever written all romances would be without their requisite happy ending, the heroines would barely be able to toddle never mind waltz off into the sunset. No dinner party would ever proceed past the soup course: happy dining perhaps for wearers of badly fitted dentures, but frustrating for the rest. The only music one would ever hear would be inane if the Tune a Day books gave up after day 3. We would never know whodunit in an Agatha Christie novel, though with that author the crime solution is usually a cheat so the rest of the pages wouldn't really help anyway. The only people who would receive phone calls would be those whose surnames started with A or B. Perhaps there's something to be said for that.

It would be a strange world indeed. Perhaps in one of those parallel universes physicists talk about when they've just blown a whole term's grant in one evening down the Student Union Bar; in one of those multiverses, people never finish writing the book, but not in our world. In our world, people write the books. We just don't always read to the end.

So to St Paul's letter to the Romans, our reading companion tonight. A book of our Bible that is very easy to give up and not read to the end of. This I want to suggest, would be a great shame. If you read the two-chapter parallel universe edition of Romans, not only will you end up with some very strange ideas about what constitutes Christianity, but you will also miss the very best bit, the absolute apogee of St Paul's writing, his great crescendo of ecstatic rapturous religious euphoria. Along with the later chapters of I Corinthians the middle chapters of Romans are one of the defining moments of the man who did more than any to define the Christian faith. It's not all, you see, about slaves being obedient and women being quiet in church and wearing hats.

We heard it today. It might not have sounded quite so exuberantly numinous to you, especially not at this wind down time on a Sunday evening, but heard it we did. Here St Paul is at his most stone-me-why-don't-you outrageous, making all sorts of claims

that no rational person could possibly take seriously. Those of a nervous disposition should turn away now.

*I am convinced St Paul says that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Paul would not have done very well as a used car dealer, or even less anachronistically perhaps as a second-hand tent seller. The hyperbole is, shall we say, just a tad overcooked; the pudding, perhaps somewhat over-egged and what is being offered has after a moment's reflection an almighty and obvious sting in its tail: Paul is, so it appears trying to sell you a lemon. How does he start his sales pitch? It is not as if Paul is soundbiting 'Find Christ, easy life'. His life indeed is vivid testament to quite how silly that surprisingly oft repeated promise might be. Instead of proffering a spiritual get-rich-quick, he lists the forces ranged against the individual Christian. There's talk earlier of hardship, distress, the sword, famine, all sorts of nasties and things found on the underside of life's rocks. And then Paul ups his ante "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers.." This is not an arbitrary list of random things for rhetorical effect: 'neither bad hangovers nor laziness nor comfy cushions nor tent pegs'. It is a brisk summary of the elemental forces of our biological and social existence,- death, life, angels, rulers- then expanded to the temporal scale- things present and things to come and finally to the extremes of almost Platonic philosophical abstraction 'neither height nor depth'. Paul, averse as ever to the soft sell, is thinking big and talking even bigger. Finally, in case anyone was about to say 'Well...what about...' the list ends 'Nor anything else in all creation' which is a somewhat posh way of saying absolutely everything. So an impressively big and scary list and then, and then, the real jaw-dropping shocker. None of this, none of it, nothing at all in the whole created order, nothing, says St Paul, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If that statement doesn't leave you, in *Sunday Sport* parlance, gobsmacked then listen again. No thing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is one of the most outrageous things that has ever been uttered by human lips; it is one of the most scandalous, the most astonishing, the most incredible things a man has ever said. And worse, much worse, perhaps worst of all, it is all true.

It doesn't take much for us to feel separated from the love of God. It doesn't take much to convince us that God isn't paying attention, that he's not really bothered

about the goings on in the little house in the LB Sutton. It might be a collection of straws on the metaphorical camel's back- the washing machine breaks down, the replacement takes a month, then it can't be fitted, then... well you know the plot- all those straws and that warm feeling of God's benevolent providence evaporates. It might be a more serious challenge: where is God's love in our loss, in our bereavement, in our suffering, in our pain and sickness, in our illness and in our dying?

*If* times of great prayer, of uplifting worship, of transcendent music or of quiet retreat can seem to stretch the veil between heaven and earth so that it seems imperceptible, alluringly thin, so times of challenge, of squalor, of affliction, of terror can make that veil seem so thick that it appears to be an impossibly impenetrable wall with nothing on the other side. At one time or other even the greatest of saints will feel that God isn't there, and if he is, he is certainly not very loving. That is an easy thing to feel. But you should never trust your feelings.

If religion makes you feel good— and there can be nothing more uplifting than worship at the right place and right time— if your worship and your prayer life gives you that warm, fuzzy, *lurve* feeling, great. That is a wonderful gift. But it is not evidence as such that God is there with His love surrounding you any more than a dull evensong or dry prayer life or an hour of extreme irritation thanks to the person on the next pew's alarming personal habits is evidence that He is not. Good mass, bad mass, dry prayer, exuberant prayer, God's loving presence is there just the same. Riches, success, health and happiness; poverty, pain, sorrow and suffering God's loving presence is there just the same:

*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*