

## *The Bread of Life all over again* 15 August 2015

Well, it's the *bread of life* again this week. Almost the same gospel as last time. I've already given my bread sermon this year and I don't suppose you want to hear it again.

Of course you can do a lot with bread: from summer pudding to holy mystery, from baguette to staff of life. So we could have a cookery sermon, which reminds me of Mary Berry from the Great British Bake-off being interviewed by the Bishop of Oxford and his getting increasingly frustrated because she'd only talk about cakes and not about how Jesus influenced her life.

Last week we heard how, to quote John, 'whoever eats this bread will live for ever'. There, I think, we are talking poetry. John is a great poem, a great improvisation, on the synoptics gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke. Even the people of first century Ephesus, where the gospel was probably written, didn't really think of living for ever. Although I admit there was a wide belief in magic and the gullible might take things literally. Like us, they surely thought that the religion of Jesus of Nazareth had the potential to bring lasting value and meaning to their lives and maybe that the 'spiritual' Jesus possessed this remarkable power *in himself*.

I've been reading Frank Skinner on stand-up comedy – *Frank Skinner on the Road*. He's a devout Roman Catholic and part time philosopher of life. I'm reading him because I want to understand more about the nature of comedy.

I can't recommend the book because it's punctuated with Anglo-Saxon words beginning with F - and worse. When I was a curate years ago in Westminster, an elderly and distinguished London Professor, Francis Wormald, asked if I could recommend a film he and his wife might go to see. I suggested Luis Bunuel's *Belle de Jour* - because I thought its star, Catherine Deneuve, was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. It's the story of a woman who's a prostitute in the day while her husband is at work. The next Sunday they politely said how much they had enjoyed it, but thought it was not the sort of film a clergyman ought to recommend it to parishioners. Too racy by half. So it's alright for me and them to see it, but not for anyone else? It's a classic now.

Skinner says (P95) that 'a comedian has to challenge taboos, has to say the unsaid.' And a few pages later adds that (P105) '...all taboos need un-tabooing; every elephant in the room needs a good slap across the arse (backside). (At this point he's discussing that most dangerous subject, paedophilia). He says, 'You might think stand-up comedy is the wrong place for that discussion, but we're not talking about the crime itself – the crime isn't open to debate; it's cut-and-dry indefensible – we're talking about society's sometimes bizarre and contradictory response to the crime. That surely is a suitable subject for comic analysis.'

When I read this I thought sermons need to un-taboo as well. But of course they very rarely do because clergypersons are frightened of un-tabooing; that is if they recognise the elephant in the room in the first place. More than their job's worth, you might say.

Let me try out an example that is actually relevant to the bread of life theme this morning. I apologise to the few of you who've heard this before.

In the eighties I was Vicar of Southgate when in vitro fertilisation became an established method of helping infertile couples have babies. The Church with a capital C was worried that to manipulate the procreative process was to interfere with the way God wanted things to be done. (Actually, if valid, that argument would be an argument against medical technology full stop.) But there was another issue: in the process, embryos created in a test tube might be disposed of and this it was said was murder, a violation against the life God had created. To cut a long story short I decided to invite a doctor from the Royal Free Hospital to talk about it at Evensong and we would have an ethical discussion. The problem was that any sensible discussion involved naming the sexual organs and the ova and sperm that are essential ingredients of a new human life. Afterwards a number of parishioners said how uncomfortable they had felt that that all this sexually explicit language had sort of polluted the very place where they received their communion.

But what did they think communion was about? I know the Old Prayer Book speaks of comfortable words: 'Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.' But the bread we eat is the broken and tortured body of Christ. Is crucifixion alright then, but the process of having a baby not? Or is the truth that this passion story of unacceptable violence has been turned into a kitsch escape from reality into a warm and fuzzy sensation of spirituality?

Something similar happened when the film 'The Life of Brian' came out. (By the way everyone says that should be the title of my autobiography.) I was given free tickets by the Southgate Gazette to watch it at Wood Green Odeon and then to write a review for the paper. When I said I found it hilarious and that Christians shouldn't feel threatened by it, I got a load of hate mail from what Frank Skinner calls Middle England. He says, 'Middle England is a vague concept, but to me it refers to that great mass of people who never question or even consider anything outside the mainstream view; people who worship at the altar of the great god Normal...think Shakespeare is boring and never miss Top Gear.' P232 To counter balance that he also says that 'In twenty-first century Britain, where, according to the papers, everybody's drunk, illiterate and carrying a knife, people still queue up to see beautiful things.' P35 So you've got philistinism and a thirst for truth and beauty side by side.

So what's funny and un-tabooing in the life of Brian? First the Wise Men go to the wrong stable, which given how seriously they take themselves on Christmas Cards is quite amusing. Then, during the Sermon on the Mount, the people at the back can't quite hear. What was that he said? Blessed are the cheesemakers? (Even this needs explaining today whereas 35 years ago it didn't). It's a joke that pricks the bubble of trying to make the tale of Jesus' simple, rural ministry too, as it were, cinematically epic. But the crowning Middle England blasphemy is when a chorus of crucified men, led by Eric Idle, sing, *Always look on the bright side of life*. Jokes about the suffering of the cross are out of bounds. A step too far. When we contemplate the atrocities of the Islamic State – beheadings and the like – we are appalled, and sickened *even more* by the fact that they crucify internal offenders, who might suffer several days' slow death.

Or is the life of Brian finale an ironic comment on the fact that, albeit unintentionally, we trivialise the horror of the crucifixion with phrases like, 'We all have our little cross to bear' or, 'there's always someone worse off than me.' But when you're being tortured to death, no one is worse off than you and that consolation isn't available. Is the humorous, un-tabooing jibe saying, how can you be so crass? Please re-assess that response. Thus the bread of the communion would be seen more as a challenge than a consolation.

Where else might the preacher take the risk of un-tabooing? Clearly the Church's attitude to sexuality remains Middle English – or maybe even down a few notches from those who worship the god, Normal. Or there's church bureaucracy, church hierarchy, church hypocrisy, being frightened of letting doctrine defend itself against modern criticism. In a University that asks more questions than it gives answers, and makes that its learning method, the church should do the same. One thing we've certainly forgotten in the church is that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. I'd rather we made a few errors of judgement in terms of bad taste, or political incorrectness, or offending people's unexamined faith or shocking Middle England than hiding the Gospel under a bushel for fear of it getting hurt; for fear that it can't stand on its own two legs and defend itself.