

Perhaps it's something to do with the way we tell our history in England, perhaps it's all that inexplicable hero-worship of serial sociopath Henry VIII, but we never seem to give the religious orders their true and due place in Western culture.

For more than 1500 years the abbeys and monasteries have been the spiritual powerhouses of the Church, the prayerful pulse of the heart of Christendom. It's so much more than dodgy haircuts and wimpoles. They preserved learning and culture in the West through the Dark Ages after the collapse of classical civilisation. Given the current resident of the White House let's hope they're still up for that job. Some of the finest minds that have ever lived emerged from the religious houses. They gave us the patterns and structure of daily prayer. They were the pioneers of hospitals, schools and universities, trailblazers for western music and spearheaded modern agriculture.

If you've ever stayed in a monastery or abbey however, you will probably be aware that I have yet to mention the crowning achievement of the monastic movement, their rarely noted but greatest gift to humanity. It is, I have to assert, the absolute height of enlightened living, the defining attribute of civilised society. It is the silent breakfast.

Now, I don't know. You might leap out of bed in the morning with a hymn of praise on your lips, ready to greet the world and eager to listen attentively to the words of wisdom of your fellow creatures. Lucky you. But for those for whom each morning is a slow and painful fall from the top of the grumpy tree, thwacking hard against each branch on the slow painful descent to full consciousness, the last thing you want to accompany your tea and toast is talking and tittle-tattle.

If you're used to sharing your waking hour with the cacophony of an indignant dog howling at the garden's squirrels competing with Piers Morgan on Breakfast TV segueing into urgent shrieks of 'Aaah I'm so late!' (every day, without fail- you'd have thought he might have learned by now): if that's your normal matins menu then the experience of the monastic breakfast is a revelation. There is but one easy rule to keep: don't choose to eat anything that says 'crunchy' on the packet, not unless you want to engage in a practical experiment concerning how long it takes to eat a bowl of cornflakes simply by letting them dissolve in your mouth. That aside, it is a joy not to feel one has to make conversation: an even greater joy is not having to listen to someone else's. It could almost tempt you to vow poverty, obedience and the other one.

So hats off to monks and nuns because they realised before the rest of us that breakfast is one of those occasions when, as the cliché has it is, silence is golden.

Silence. It can be a strange and powerful thing, it is experienced in many different ways. There is the uncomfortably embarrassed silence of the crowded lift, the excruciating silences of the eek-out-every-word stilted conversation, the long empty silences of the single home or the cruel, punishing silence of being sent to Coventry. More positively there's a forest on a summer morning filled with all the thrumming silence of nature about its business; the intense, concentrated prayerful silence before the Eucharist (if I can't be sarcastic in a sermon when can I be?); the delightful, exquisite silence when the builders down their tools and go home for the day.

And then there is that peculiar, pregnant silence of the delay in-between the occurrence of a major event and the hearing of its associated sound. If you witness, say, an avalanche, a volcanic eruption or the collapse of a demolished building, you will see it first and then for a few seconds... there is absolute silence until the full sound of the event catches up.

This is the sort of silence you will experience tonight; this is the silence that is at this very moment ringing in our ears. Because tonight we witness the most seismic of all events, the culmination of all human history. This is not a major event. It is not even an event that changed history. It is the event which defines history, the event around which all other histories revolve.

The Word became flesh.

And here we are in the thick, palpable silence, before the full impact of that event hits us, just before the onrush of sound catches up. Just listen...

The silence after the defining moment of human history is, however, about to be broken. And it will be broken, not by an earth-shaking explosion, not by an ear-splitting sonic blast or the sizzle and crash of thunder & lightning; not by a three minute brass fanfare; not even by the rustle of angels wings.

No, the silence will be broken by the sound of a baby crying. The Word became flesh, and, as all babies do, started crying.

Now, to its parents a newborn child is utterly extraordinary. And almost certainly to its adoring grandparents. Uncles may be a little less astonished, and by the time it gets to a stranger on the street, the child has become, well, ordinary. However spe-

cial and unique and wonderful each child may be; whatever their individual attributes; as a human infant they are just one more of millions. And yet, the most extraordinary event, the mystery of all the ages is to be manifest in that most ordinary of things, a little squalling, squirming and maybe sometimes, hopefully though probably not when we want to, sleeping human infant. God has become an ordinary, helpless, human child.

What sort of God is this? Well it is certainly not the sort of God we would make up for ourselves. If, as cynical scientists and brittle humanists sometimes scornfully say this God was a figment of our imagination, then what an unimaginative lot we are.

Ever since the Jesus story has been told there have been attempts to embroider it to make the baby Jesus less ordinary. Some accounts tell of the baby Jesus speaking from his cradle, baby Jesus preventing dragons from eating Mary, baby Jesus bringing a dried, salted fish back to life. Suitable material for a Dan Brown novel perhaps but all nonsense, all misunderstanding, all pious attempts to make the event, well, less 'ordinary'.

But that is to miss the point, that is to throw the baby Jesus out with the bathwater. It is the very ordinariness of Jesus' birth which transforms it, it is the very ordinariness of Jesus' birth which transforms us. After all, we cannot *but* be sanctified by the presence of God-with-us. What begins this Mass as ordinary bread and wine is, in and by the presence of God-with-us, sanctified and transformed into that which is infinitely beyond our comprehension and beyond all our expressions of wonder.

Where God is, everything is transformed. And now... God is with us.

So. We stand in that mystical, silent space of the Word become flesh. We stand at the silence at the beginning, at the end, at the culmination and fulfilment of human history. God is with us.

And before the tumult of the festive season completely dampens our senses and dulls our hearing, let us *enjoy* the silence. It's *even* better than a silent breakfast. Now you know what that silence means.