

There comes an age in every child's life when being right is of extreme importance. To be more precise, there comes a point when ensuring that everyone else is aware that you are right and they are wrong becomes important. The age of onset varies, but this phenomenon is usually well established and in full steam by the time the child is on the SMYL week in Carrot Wood. Etymology suddenly takes over from entomology as the favourite pastime. Use of idiom is no longer acceptable if the resulting language is say, poetic and not scientific. Any hint of imprecision, any toying with illogical or unempirical thought (both of which experience teaches are actually the bread and butter of human happiness) will be greeted with undisguised derision and pounced on with merciless ferocity.

"Ah well" you might say in response to some minor early adolescent calamity "that's the way the cookie crumbles", only to receive a reply something along the lines of

"No, experiments have shown that a cookie actually crumbles in a regular form proportional to the pressure applied to it in a roughly fractal pattern which is NOTHING LIKE the totally random mess that is my life!"

Your best empathy and sympathy are thus rebuffed, your claimed knowledge of the physics of biscuit breaking shown up for the sham that it is and you for the charlatan that you are.

Precisely a decade ago, my nephews, both entered this developmental stage simultaneously, much to the chagrin and exasperation of their parents and grandparents, so it was with some delight that I chanced upon a book just before the elder nephew's birthday at a knock-down bargain price called 'The Pedant's Revolt'. Such an awful pun for a title was undeniably attractive, and most importantly the cover suggested boldly that the book would tell its reader 'why most things you think are right are wrong'. Well, there you go I thought, the perfect gift. When he's read it, his younger brother can read it too. Won't they be insufferable of a couple of months? While I'm happily hundreds of miles away.

As it turned out, I should have spend a bit more time in the shop sampling pages from the book before I bought it. When I flicked through it at home just before wrapping it I discovered that one entry- just the one- would have increased the biological knowledge of my nephew to the point where he would have been the envy of all his friends but just a little too precocious in that department for a 12 year old. Of course, like all children then he could quote the entire scripts of all three series of Little Britain verbatim, but I suspect in-depth understanding of the words was lacking.

The Pedants Revolt would have provided it. As both godparent and priest I would not have wanted to be seen to be responsible for such an inappropriate increase in my nephew's knowledge, so I read the book myself. And fascinating stuff it was too. Apparently Cleopatra was Greek not Egyptian, Alexander Graham Bell didn't invent the telephone, coffee doesn't sober up a drunk it just makes him a wide awake drunk, and we don't only use 10 per cent of our brain cells, we use almost all of them. Even Donald Trump, but he's starting with a greatly reduced quantity.

Perhaps pubescent pedantry is part of the process that starts when a child finally realises that the tooth fairy say, or pulled faces staying that way if the wind changes, those things that he has been told for his own good; that these things are parental porkies. It is a process which has its earliest peak with those first horrified inklings of the biological mechanics that must have been necessary for mum and dad to produce... too terrible to contemplate.

But contrary to the pedant's belief or indeed adult arrogance that peak is just the first. We do not hit twelve and suddenly all the wool is pulled from our eyes. That wool has almost infinite layers and having our treasured facts and beliefs overturned is a lifelong process. Yes, as a child, it was only after an especially excruciatingly embarrassing game of Animal Vegetable Mineral that I discovered that treacle, rather than being mined in Pudsey as I had always been told, was derived from plants. But it was at a somewhat older age, way past adolescent assurance, only when I studied anatomy, that I came to realise that men did not have one rib fewer than women. You wouldn't believe it but I must have had a religious upbringing.

About the same time my nephews discovered they were always right, there emerged a little movement of militant atheists making headlines with claims that what we are doing here this evening is just one big attempt to escape facing reality, a way of holding on to our cherished truths, a refusal to face realities through the delusionary invention of God. Not so. Contrary to the imaginings of Hitchens, Dawkins and their fellow adolescents, we are not here in church because we are running away from the truth. We are not here desperately clinging to a bigger and better version of Father Christmas, unable to let go of our childish fantasies, willing what is untrue to be true. Far from it: faith in Jesus is the furnace in which all fantasies must be consumed, Christianity is the crusher of cherished truths.

The people of ancient Judea knew all sorts of certainties: that leprosy was incurable, that the person born blind would never see, that death was the end and the dead

never, but never come back to life. These were all unassailable truths right up to the point when Jesus touched the funeral bier and brought the widow's son back to life, when he reached out to cleanse the leper, when the man born blind could see.

The Pharisees were right. They knew they were right. Puritans always do. They cherished the traditions and truths of Israel's God like nobody else ever had or ever could, they was absolutely 100% sure and firm in those beliefs right up until the moment they met that very same God in the person of Jesus. For some, those truths shattered into a million brittle shards and thus was born our faith.

Every time the stats are wheeled out they show one undeniable truth: the Christian religion is on the decline in England, trapped in an ever-accelerating nose-dive into irrelevance. Some would like to think that this is because most people are finally waking up from their fairy-tale dreams and smelling the coffee. I doubt it. After all, these super-enlightened folk are the same people who voted in the 2016 referendum *and* buy lottery tickets every week. Instead, perhaps, rather than waking from an religious opiate stupor, most have elected to stay in bed with their sheets over their heads rather than face the home truths of the Gospel.

Truths like it is what is what comes from inside that defiles not the externals. That our actions have consequences. That might is not right. That the desire for money is the root of many evils not a necessary and desirable economic attribute. That success is not measured by one's proximity to the top of the heap and those who would be great must be the slave of all. Bless those who persecute you, turn the other cheek. God so loved the world that he sent his only son, a son who suffered and died on the cross.

Separated from God, turning our back on God, waking up to a world without God does not give us a religion-free better life, it gives us Auschwitz, Stalingrad, the Great Leap Forward, the Killing Fields, 9/11, 7/7 and Guantanamo Bay.

These are not home truths that are comforting to hear. No wonder, then, that for many it seems better to get back in bed.

But it is only when all those certainties with which we feather our nests turn to dust, when we let our hearts be broken, our illusions shattered, our comforts lost: even when those comforts are, as they were for the Pharisees, the cherished religious standards and rituals, the rules we know we only have to keep to be saved: only when all this has crumbled to dust in our hands when we stand empty-handed and

speechless before our God with nothing to rely on but his mercy, his grace and the light of faith, only then can we start to see the only undeniable truth. The truth of God's love for us, the love that brings all creation into being, that holds us there in the ecstatic joy of the Holy Spirit, that besotted love of a God who cannot drop his gaze, the love that dwelt among us and dwells among us still, the love that paid the ultimate sacrifice and counted it a small cost indeed, that purifying furnace of love divine.