

Toilet Sermon

As you know, Father Christmas arrives in Cambridge long before he arrives anywhere else in Christendom. And before term ends, we will be singing Christmas carols and exchanging Christmas gifts. Now, whatever Christmas means, above all else, it celebrates the incarnation. That is, the belief that God became human, that the CEO of the multiverse became a burping, belching, pooping bundle of chubby limbs. Or, in the language of the sermon series for this term and next, a deity sometimes regarded as 'supernatural' became 'natural'. At Christmas, the almighty ruler of the cosmos, is naturalised.

Most Christians simply cannot cope with the sheer humanity of the Jesus they claim to worship. The subconscious default image of the historical Jesus is an aloof character, out there and up there somewhere. A pious human-like ghostly carpenter who gently hovered his way through Ancient Israel without ever stubbing his toe, getting sawdust in his eye or hitting his thumb with a hammer. But it's worth reflecting on the fact that Christians sing and pray to a deity who – on a regular basis – used the latrine.

So, before visiting the latrines of Jesus' day, it is worth contemplating how – even today – the toilet plays a major role in shaping, or at least, reflecting, our own belief systems. It was Hegel, who, in the 18th century, famously distinguished between the triad of ideological foundations, of England, France and Germany. The philosopher and psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek, has highlighted how these are still reflected today in our toilet designs. In a German toilet, there is an inspection platform available for use by the user. In French, everything is whisked away as quickly as possible. Off with his head. In Anglo American toilets, there is an odd fusion between the two designs. Žižek concludes that these three are reflected in national traits of each respective country:

reflective thoroughness (German), revolutionary hastiness (French), utilitarian pragmatism (English). In political terms, this triad can be read as German conservatism, French revolutionary radicalism and English liberalism. In terms of the predominance of one sphere of social life, it is German metaphysics and poetry versus French politics and English economics. The point about toilets is that they enable us not only to discern this triad in the most intimate domain, but also to identify its underlying mechanism in the three different attitudes towards excremental excess: an ambiguous contemplative fascination; a wish to get rid of it as fast as possible; a pragmatic decision to treat it as ordinary and dispose of it in an appropriate way. It is easy for an academic at a round table to claim that we live in a post-ideological universe, but the moment he visits the lavatory after the heated discussion, he is again knee-deep in ideology.

Absent from Žižek's reflection is the recent Japanese phenomenon of a high-performance toilet with a control panel as complex as the cockpit of a fighter jet, which activates all manner of posterial technological miracles to increase cleanliness and minimise unpleasantness: automatic seat-lifting; optimal temperature settings; anti-gravity water-jets; warm air-blowers etc. These toilets provide the visitor with everything short of a prostate exam and a cappuccino, and reflect the technological worldview designed to mask our human frailty.

Sanitation as whole is a key component in the modernisation of our world and has had a far greater impact on our worldview than we might imagine. The fact that – for the vast majority of the time – we need invest no thought in visiting the toilet is itself an enormous privilege. For our ancestors a visit

to the latrine was an event. Today, when all is in good working order, the toilet is a minor part of life. To view it as a key to unlocking the secrets of our entire civilization may seem extreme – but that is precisely the interpretive hurdle we must overcome. The great triumph of sanitation technology has distanced us from our ancestors in ways that – precisely because of that triumph – remain largely invisible to us. Our failure to factor toilet habits into our sense of history diminishes our capacity to hear the past. Along with double-glazing, central-heating and shrink-wrapped food, modern toilets – for all their advantages – have in some sense separated us from our world, our neighbours, our predecessors and our bodies.

Ancient Jewish theologies knew the wisdom of integrating our physical, social, political realities with our spirituality, our beliefs and our worldview. Personal hygiene was a matter of such serious concern, it naturally found its way into religious reflection. Toilets (as we understand them today) were largely non-existent in ancient Palestine. Most toilet experiences involved squatting rather than sitting, and excrement was to be transported away from human habitations. The aching quadriceps, the putrid odour, the sloppy and sticky sounds, the insanitary conditions and the difficulties of disposal were commonplace. No doubt, because this was all that most people would have known, personal and social coping mechanisms were well in place and the tasks of the toilet may have been performed without much self-consciousness. But however the populace conducted its toiletry affairs, the location of such affairs could hardly be deemed ‘public *conveniences*.’ The older anyone gets, the greater the potential for a simple toilet visit to become an ominous occasion. The ‘Talmud’ (a magnificent source of Jewish thought, belief and law) includes a prayer and blessing from the 5th Century CE echoing this concern.

One who enters a toilet says to the angels who accompany him at all times: ‘Be honoured, honourable holy ones, servants of the One on High, give honour to the God of Israel, leave me until I enter, do my will and return to you.’

Abaye said: A person should not say this, in case they abandon him and go. Instead he should say: ‘Guard me, guard me, help me, help me, support me, support me, wait for me, wait for me until I enter and come out, as this is the way of humanity.’

Upon leaving, one says: ‘Blessed is he... who formed humanity in wisdom, and created in him many orifices and cavities. It is revealed and known before the throne of your glory that were one of them to be ruptured or blocked, it would be impossible to survive and stand before you.’

All that to say that, if the Word Became Flesh, if God becomes human, then he becomes fully and utterly and disgustingly human. This is not the God of Hark the Herald angels sing – veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. Nor is this a god who keeps humanity at arm’s length. Nor is it a god who cannot deal with the crudest, basest, dirtiest dimensions of human life. Whatever salvation means, it is the embodiment of a terrifying radical otherness that gets his hands dirty with us, regardless, utterly regardless of the condition in which we find ourselves.

In 2019 Pope Francis delivered an inspiring and heart-warming Christmas address about the smile of the baby Jesus, which included the following reflection.

Jesus is the smile of God. He came to reveal to us the love of our Heavenly Father, His goodness, and the first way He did so was to smile at His parents, like every new-born child in this world. And they,

the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph, because of their great faith, were able to accept that message, they recognized in Jesus' smile God's mercy for them and for all those who were waiting for His coming...

Far be it from me to disagree with the pope himself. In fact, I think he spoke truer than he knew. Because when a baby smiles it is for one reason: profound relief from the discomfort of an internal build up. For the first few weeks of their lives, babies smile because they experience the glory of a human body in full working order. If Jesus was a fully human baby (rather than a fake pseudo human imposter) then yes he did smile, and yes it was because he filled his swaddling clothes. And here the profundity of papal insight runs deep. If Mary and Joseph recognised in the smile of their new-born infant the promise of God's saving action – it was the recognition that the CEO of the multiverse had humbled himself to obey the call of nature. The word became flesh.

INTERCESSION

Lord God, we worship you as Lord of heaven and earth, whose reach extends beyond the furthest galaxy, and into the depths of the human psyche.

We praise you as the word become flesh, the joy of heaven to earth come down. And so we thank you for the comforts we enjoy, the luxuries we might too readily take for granted, and the bodily pleasures that are gifts from you.

But we seek your help in becoming ever more fully human, ever more fully the people you have created us to be. When our shrink wrapped food distances us from all that was involved in providing us with a meal, awaken us to the world. To the consequences of our lifestyles on animals, on people, on our environment. And help us to learn the responsibilities that comfort brings.

When our central heating and double-glazing separates us from the seasons, from the rhythms of the world you have created, from the marvels of the world on our doorstep, awaken us again to our place in this world.

When our wardrobes fill with throwaway clothes – awaken us to the plight of those who labour under terrible conditions to provide us with luxuries

we don't need. Show us what it means to care for others, in such a way as to fight for changes in working conditions, for sustainable means of living.

We thank you for our bodies – and ask that you help us to become more attuned to them, that we might become more attuned to others and to you. That your word might become flesh in the way that we live from day to day, and that our lives might be living proof of your life-giving love.