

"The original shimmering self gets buried so deep that most of us end up hardly living out of I at all, instead we live out of our other selves which we are constantly putting on and taking off like coats and hats against the worlds weather..."

I don't know what you like to do on a rainy winters night, or what your Christmas television habits are, but I have to confess to a sneaking fondness in the dark months for...Family Fortunes.

Now it is just about conceivable that you have never seen this popular equivalent of University Challenge. But in that case you have missed a treat. Essentially it involves a survey of over 100 people - asked to give the first answer that comes to mind in a series of categories - and contestants asked to guess the ten most popular answers. A successful guess is greeted by the a reassuring 'Bing!', an unsuccessful one by a somewhat less reassuring sound (X)...

When the contestants are put on the spot, their answers can be revealing of what is really going on - or not going on - in their minds...

Many of the answers are understandable, but inaccurate or eccentric:

We asked more than 100 people to name something made of wool: You said "Cotton wool..". Our survey said... X

We asked more than 100 people to name a part of the body you only have one of: You said "Your Big Toe". Our survey said... X

The best answers are the ones which are incontestable, while still managing to be entirely wrong.

We asked more than 100 people to name a bad place to fall asleep: you said..."Concrete.." Our survey said... X

We asked more than 100 people to name something you start to lose as you get older: you said... "Your purse" Our survey said...X

We asked more than 100 people to name a number you might have to memorise: you said..."Seven.." Our survey said... X

So when in a recent Christmas Special the question was, "we asked more than 100 people to name something that sums up Christmas - what do you imagine featured among the top ten responses? You'll be relieved to know that the Virgin Mary, and the baby Jesus *did* both bring a bing from the computer. As, fittingly in its own way, did White Christmas. But the top answer was: the Christmas Tree.

Do you already have a Christmas tree? Will you get one? Will you keep your presents under it or sit in front of it to open them? These are rhetorical questions of course, because it is hard to argue with the idea that the Christmas Tree has become one of our most significant symbols of Christmas. They are (almost) everywhere...

But why is that? How have these German Firs ended up invading our Christmas culture, as thoroughly as St Boniface's religion invaded the groves they sprang from? How is that Nordic Spruces have come to dominate our parlours as comprehensively as Scandi Crime Dramas dominate our Christmas Radio Times. What qualifies the Tannenbaum or any of its relatives to become the thing that sums up Christmas in the popular imagination?

I know there are a lot of people who would point to its *origins* in the Norse myths of Yggdrasil – an evergreen at the centre of the universe, planted before the ground itself, whose roots are in the underworld, and which reaches to Asgard - the realm of the gods.

And very probably it's exalted place in our hearts if not our hearths does have some of its roots there, but then the tree or the pole or the tower is such a universal human image of the link between earth and sky, gods and mortals, that it shouldn't surprise us to find it in the Christian Festival which celebrates the moment heaven came down to earth in order to take mortal life up into the Divine.

And in fact, if someone wanted to stage the play of the whole Judeo-Christian faith they wouldn't have to struggle for long to come up with the centrepiece for their set. This is a story that gathers itself around a tree. Planted in Eden, burning with divine presence, welcoming angelic visitors in its shade; cut back to a stump but not destroyed, the rood for the sacrifice, magically blossoming in the end with leaves of healing, and the fruits of a life fully alive. This is a carpenter's faith sure enough. A love story carved into the bark.

And in medieval times, the whole story would be told over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in the form of two trees - with the feast of Adam and Eve - celebrated on the night before Christmas with a tree hung with apples to represent the tree of knowledge, leading into the feast of the nativity the following morning marked by another tree, this time decked with light and sweets, symbolising the tree of life and its goodly medicine (pace Damien Hirst)...

But although, perhaps with a little recent help from the family tree of Queen Victoria, we very much still have an ancient tree in our midst, the apples have mostly given way to baubles, and it is nowadays really only *one* of these trees, if any, we are remembering with our evergreens, as the feast of Adam and Eve has... fallen away...

I imagine this is probably for similar reasons that our trees have gone up earlier and earlier across the Winters, and Advent in keeping its own calendar has largely disappeared from ours, simply because we are not overly keen on ideas of sin and original sin at the best of times, and we definitely don't want to harp on about it at Christmas...

For the most part we are understandably resistant to the idea attributed to Augustine of some kind of fatal disease transmitted sexually across the generations, and at a time when innocence is celebrated, when we are acutely aware of the vulnerability of the innocent...the last thing we want to imply is that even a newborn child is somehow tainted.

And yet. As the presence of the tree, and all we are celebrating today, ought to remind us. The Christian Story of Christmas doesn't fully make sense without Adam and Eve and the fall...the Christian story per se ultimately requires both the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life to be represented in the cross that is its focal point.

So perhaps it would help us - not just at Christmas - to think of original sin not as something passed on but as something not passed on. Not as a something at all, but, as Aquinas, and Augustine both suggested, as a lack.

Perhaps we should call the fall, the LOSS.

Because in the story of that tree (in Eden), Adam and Eve lose something, something that was supposed to define them as surely as a diamond defines the setting that was made for it, and because you cannot pass on what you do not have - what they passed on to all who came after - what we call original sin - was that lack - that empty space...

Since then our best human attempts at religion have been creating boxes to house the absence - to make it somehow solid and tangible - lest we forget there is anything missing in the first place, since then everything that might be called faith has been a holding open of the place of what was lost, and most of our worst excesses, religious and secular, have come as a result of man-made efforts to fill it.

But it is this faithful holding open of a space, for the gift of God to be restored, that Israel embodied at the centre of its worship in the Ark of the Covenant - in the gap between the Cherubim - the throne or footstool waiting for its King;

It is just this faithful making room for God's presence that is embodied for us in the person of Mary, or for that matter in the obedience of Joseph, even in the tiniest act of hospitality extended by the innkeeper;

And it is this same act and attitude that is asked of us, by our tree reminding us of the loss, and by our gifts reminding us of the promise of its return, by our nativity celebrations reminding us of *how* it comes to us*, and by that other tree, foreshadowed in this one, reminding us of its fulfilment, and the lifting up of our mortality into the immortal life of love.

Every Christmas asks more than 100 people:

Can you recognise in yourself, even in what is least public about you, the hidden space that speaks of humility and hope?

Will you allow the radiant light of God's presence to turn a humble human heart, no more prepared than a stable or a manger, simply offered as available, into a glorious vessel of the most holy treasure. And see in your very own life humanity restored to its original shimmering self?

Let us pray that every time the question is asked (of us) the survey will say... Bing.

