

Some of you may be old enough to remember this quote from Monty Python on the meaning of life:

*It's nothing very special. Try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in and try and live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.*

Nice sentiments but anodyne, perhaps deliberately so, to highlight the weakness of most of our hopes and aspirations. It lacks bite, It doesn't address the reality of the world's suffering – that suffering that comes home to us relentlessly, now, through the media, but eventually, in one way or another, in our own lives too: the death of a loved one; the loss of a job; a diagnosis of cancer; failing energies and eyesight. All these are very special and just being nice won't cut it. It's a start but can also be an evasion, deliberately not dealing with the other person's real need and perhaps an admission that we *can't*: I *can't* cure your cancer; I can't raise you from the dead; I can't stop the passing of time and all its ravages or the ravages of war and so on.

There's been an interesting and instructive series on iPlayer recently on whether the USA should be the policeman of the world and mostly it highlights failure: in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, without daring to touch on Vietnam, and there is a strong possibility that it will fail again in the Ukraine and is failing in Israel. Hubris is part of the story but also the humbling realisation that the main players are imperfect people attempting to control events in an imperfect world – and many of them with strong Christian sentiments.

James and John are perfect examples of such imperfect people. They want the best seats in the synagogue, as it were, with no idea of what that really means. It's a place of sacrifice, not of self-serving: a place of surrender on which even Jesus at his death appears to doubt that he has a place at God's right hand; it's a place, indeed, to which even he cannot lay claim. It is in God's gift only and so demands radical trust.

*For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served  
but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

This may not take the edge off suffering when it comes, but it may perhaps point to a meaning that is beyond us; a graced understanding that we are not alone in our suffering; that someone has been there before, has drunk the cup of suffering to its dregs and has indeed been baptised in it – this life that leads inevitably to death.

We have a choice, then, to continue living our anodyne lives, being nice to one another, maintaining a healthy diet, diverting ourselves occasionally with a good book or film, perhaps, and trying to get on with our neighbours, or we can realise the radical absurdity of it all without Christ – without, that is, the suffering Christ who lived this absurdity for us – and lived to tell the tale. So life then, and joy, is not within our gift, so when it *does* come we may realise that we are within the gift of another.

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