

Charterhouse Column for Catholic Herald

The BBC has invited “faith communities” to say how they would like to be portrayed on radio and TV. I don’t see much hope of ever having the Christian faith shown authentically in the mass media because, in the interests of “neutrality” and “balance” – why, by the way, do we seem to have to reach for the inverted commas for so many phrases these days? – religion is hardly ever presented confessionally. Instead, like RE in schools, religion on the airwaves is something that is only spoken “about”.

This pretence to objectivity is a sham for it assumes there is some neutral point from which all faiths can be evaluated. There is such a point, of course; but it is the perspective of secularism. And the broadcasters, under the guise of even-handedness, are merely brainwashing the public with secular values. Why should the default position be atheism?

I’ve enjoyed broadcasting quite a bit over the years and I can even claim to have presented the hallowed – only nowadays it’s very unhallowed – *Thought for the Day*. This was probably long before many of you were born, dear readers. They wouldn’t let an undeconstructed traditionalist me within a Sabbath day’s journey of a religious programme these days.

My main claim to fame is to be a minor star of one of those TV compilations - *100 Worst Television Moments*. If you stay up late one night, you might even see me. It was in the days when I used to trot up from my country parish in Yorkshire to the *Tyne Tees TV* studios to present *The Epilogue*. For some reason best known to the producer, we used to record the programmes either late in the evening or after a very good lunch.

Anyhow on this celebrated occasion I was recording *The Epilogue* when I fell asleep. This is one of the *100 Worst Television Moments*. Quite deserved too. My only disappointment is that my narcoleptic droning qualified me only for 76th place in the hierarchy of tedium. I wish I’d won first prize, number one. The most boring TV moment *ever* – now that would have been an achievement.

One of the best religious broadcasters ever must be Archbishop Anthony Bloom. I heard a good story about him this week. It was Lent and the Archbishop had been talking about sin and repentance. A religious lady of a certain age – she that hath ears to hear, let her hear – wrote to tell him that she had “overcome all my vices except one”. And the Archbishop replied, “O my dear, whatever you do, hang on to that one!”

There was a sparkling frost across the churchyard when I went out to do a country funeral the other day. The deceased was Jason’s old dad – according to Jason himself, “a rambunctious old b*****”. Liked a pint or seven did the old boy.

Anyhow, Jason had decided to see him off in style and so he hired a coach and horses and decorated the cortege with ostrich feathers and draped the coffin with the Red Ensign in memory of the old boy’s merchant Navy days. The procession stopped at

one of his favourite hostelrys and, as Jason had promised him, the coffin was taken into the four ale bar and a pint of best bitter none too solemnly placed on the lid. A toast was proposed and somewhat obscurely the old man's health was drunk, and, as they say, there wasn't a dry throat in the house.

Then it was off across the road to the churchyard. A brilliant blue and gold winter's day with the mourners' breath rising in clouds of steam. The praying finished and the undertaker's men stepped forward to lower the coffin into the earth. Consternation – it didn't fit. And not all the elegant shoving and grunting of the men could make it fit. The grave had been dug too small.

Nothing for it then, except for one of the men in the Dickens outfit to take off his frock coat and get down to some serious digging. Trouble was he revealed his T-shirt with the skull and crossbones on the back and on the front a slogan so hideously pornographic I thought the ground would open up with a vengeance and swallow the lot of us.

Digging graves is hard enough at the best of times, but trying to shift frosty earth requires the muscles of Hercules and the patience of Job. Ten minutes later, and after three more attempts to get the old boy into his final resting place, the substantial congregation were twitching with embarrassed frozen smiles. It was then that Jason relieved the considerable tension by calling out in a loud and cheerful voice, "Ah well, dad, y'old s** - you were always tight..." (He meant tipsy, not stingy) "...when you were alive and now you're too tight to fit into your own hole!"

It did the trick. One more heave and dad slid into his neat little bit of winter earth and the rest of us went back to his local and spent the afternoon in gleeful recollection of the obstinate obsequies.

I was reading that gem of a book G.K.Chesterton's *Autobiography*. GKC recounts how as a boy he used to sit in the fireplace and eavesdrop on the conversation of his parents and their guests. One evening they were melancholy and bewailing the fact that there didn't seem to be much worth being thankful for.

It was at this moment that Chesterton's grandpa – a very old man who rarely spoke – piped up with, "I would give thanks for my creation even if I knew I was a lost soul!"

And then Chesterton tells us of a solemn friend of this grandfather who used to go for walks on Sunday carrying a prayer book, without the least intention of going to church. And he calmly defended it with uplifted hand, "I do it Chessie as an example to others".

This book is a masterpiece. And so cheerful. GKC was that rare fellow who could move invisibly from a paragraph elucidating the Thomist philosophy to this reminiscence of his wedding day:

"I stopped on the way to church to drink a glass of milk in one shop and to buy a revolver with cartridges in another. Some have seen these as singular wedding presents for a bridegroom to give to himself; and if the bride had known less of him, I

suppose she might have fancied that he was a suicide or a murderer - or, worst of all, a teetotaller”.