

At Evensong last Tuesday we read about Pharaoh's dream in which seven thin cows devoured seven fat cows, but still they looked no fatter. It seemed to quite a few of us like a comment on our present economic crisis. Mr Brown says he didn't see it coming, but a member of our congregation at St Michael's, Bill Bonner, predicted the slump years ago in his book *Empire of Debt*. But the whole mess was detected back in 1971 by C.H. Sisson who, writing about Ezra pound, spoke of:

*"...the monstrous aberration of a world in which reality is distorted down to a detail never so comprehensively implicated before by the pull of a fictitious money."*

We needn't get caught up in the old row about usury. The church since the Middle Ages has recognised the need for reasonable rates of interest. Only excessive borrowing and lending leading to mountains of debt is condemned.

But our current crisis involves a lot more than money. It is a cultural and spiritual crisis. Sisson's terrifying phrase *reality is distorted* is precisely the mess we now inhabit. Western societies have for a long time been dealing in unreality. We have forgotten the commandment *Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image*. In fact most people would look at you as if you were barmy if you referred to that piece of primitive nonsense. Except it is not primitive and it is not nonsense. Our age worships image to a degree to which the primitive idolaters never aspired.

Our society has turned away from real life and preferred voyeurism. Seventy-per-cent of the Internet is pornography. Some years ago, the computer industry estimated how much silicon they would need for the worldwide production of microchips. They found their estimate did not even cover the amount needed for video games. Millions spend the greater part of the day solipsistically wasting their lives online. Are we surprised therefore when this week we saw the shocking figures, which revealed that the majority of British people cannot read and write and count adequately? Technology has advanced so that now there are online programmes which allow you to create an artificial reproduction of yourself – called an *avatar* – which can enjoy extraordinary adventures in cyberspace.

For three thousand years philosophers have wrestled with the problem of appearance versus reality. Modern culture has resolved this ancient difficulty by the simple expedient of deleting one of the terms. Now all is appearance. And to be is to be seen when reality is a screen.

For a generation TV producers have been returning our lives to us caricatured and uncriticised in the soap operas – the opium of the masses. But recently they have gone much further. I remember in the 1960s there was a TV play which caused huge controversy. It was called *The*

*Year of the Sex Olympics.* In this play people watched other people's real lives as a form of entertainment. It seemed very far-fetched and of course obscene. Now it has come true in such shows as *Big Brother* and the hideously unreal culture of celebs.

We are living attenuated lives – lives at a distance. Of course a portable phone might be useful if you were thinking of going up a mountain alone. Or if you were a Euro MP and you could record a message saying, *I'm on the gravy train.* But this incessant mindless jabber and obsessive texting is a universal psychosis. People fidgeting over their keyboards as if picking at a scab. A couple walking down Cornhill side by side, speaking into their portable phones – probably to each other.

*Unreal City. Under the brown fog of a winter dawn, a crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, I had not thought death had undone so many.*

We have rejected the real, incarnational faith of Christianity and adopted colossal unrealities such as universal human rights and the preposterous pagan myth of Global Warming. We aspire to save the planet. We cannot even save our own souls.

The church used to provide the antidote to this stony rubbish, this zombie-like dreaming, this lack of attention, this *tumid apathy with no concentration.* But over the last generation the church has capitulated and adopted the very procedures of its enemies. First by abandoning its sacred English texts *The King James Bible* and *The Book of Common Prayer* and substituting for them prayers that sound as if they were written by the illiterate partnership of the advertising industry and Noddy.

This year things have reached a new low. Bishops and Archbishops used to provide us with Lent books, spiritual reading to help us draw closer to God. Look what they've given us this year: *Love Life: Live Lent.*

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have written the Foreword to three booklets to guide us through Lent: one for *The Family*; one for *Adults and Youth* and the other for *Kids.* Indistinguishable. If anyone had suggested thirty years ago that the Archbishops would put their names to this sort of rubbish, they would have been accused of mischief-making. But now we have such Archbishops: Canterbury – the Regius Professor of Obfuscation and York – the Past-Master of the Futile Gesture.

These glossy booklets feature *Mr Men* style cartoon pictures whom we must suppose are meant to represent the general public. Achingly politically-correct with all races represented - but no fat people or smokers. Dumbing-down beyond the farthest reaches of infantilisation, the booklets urge us to use Lent to *Do fun things together. Create a space in your home...a corner of a room...an understairs cupboard... a shelf...make a prayer den using furniture and*

*blankets...gather some objects that are fun to touch, feel and smell: a piece of velvet, feathers, a tray of sand, lavender bags or pine cones.* These should be enough to satisfy at least some of the more mentionable fetishes among us.

And what are we supposed to do in the prayer space? *Take in some pebbles or shells* – presumably to demonstrate impeccable ecumenical relations with primitive animists and tree-huggers. And prayers are supplied: *Dear God, make wrong things right...* But this is not God; only the sentimental wish-fulfilment of Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy. We are even educated into the correct manual acts to perform while praying this desolate prayer: *Shake your finger from side to side for 'wrong' and then do thumbs up for 'right'.*

You feel there should be a caution not to do this near a window in case the neighbours see you and phone for the men in white coats.

*Give a lollipop to your lollipop person.*

Of course, as always in the Church of England these days, the sheer blithering inanities only faintly disguise the right-on political hard sell:

*Email or write to your MP about a global poverty issue... Buy a fair Trade Easter egg. Help lighten our load on the planet... defrost your fridge and find out how climate change affects poorer people...help stop global climate change: recycle your rubbish save trees, use both sides of the paper...*

(When doing what, by the way?)

The church has produced a blasphemous parody of the faith and asked us to take it as Gospel. But what happens to those who are infatuated by images? When Moses came down the mountain and saw them dancing round the golden calf, he:

*...took the calf and burnt it in the fire and ground it to powder and strawed it upon the water and made the children of Israel drink it.*

So Like them we shall be poisoned by our images. Our contemporary culture worships the devil, the Ape of God; Satan the Father of Lies. We have moved beyond decadence to the time of judgement. And we shall be judged by God, that is by the destroyer of images, the standard of reality.