

We are in what the Church rather uninspiringly calls 'ordinary time'; Christmas is past and Easter is not yet come. There are a few feast days sprinkled here and there, but otherwise we are in the relentless march of ordinary time. But there is nothing wrong with being 'ordinary'. To want to be extraordinary or special usually means that deep inside one feels exactly the opposite. It is a sign of low self-esteem.

One of the biggest boils on the body of our society is the so-called 'cult of celebrity' – and it desperately needs lancing. It is a symptom of the sickness that afflicts our modern age in the west: meaninglessness. Carl Jung said that meaninglessness is the only thing the human person cannot endure; all suffering can be borne if it is perceived through the lens of meaning – this is true even of the unimaginable suffering in Auschwitz, as Victor Frankl testified in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Samuel Beckett, a 20th century playwright who won the Nobel Prize for literature, wrote mainly about the human condition as he saw it. Beckett makes me very uneasy because I can't stand his work, but I instinctively know that it is important. I feel the same about the painter, Francis Bacon: repulsive but significant. Samuel Beckett's vision was dark and despairing; in one particular short two-act play called *Happy Days*, a woman called Winnie is buried up to her waist in some

unidentifiable, sludgy hole; in the second act she is buried up to her neck. The play consists entirely of a stream of banal chatter – inconsequential, absurd babble that becomes increasingly desperate, hysterical almost, as Winnie talks about anything and everything rather than face the ghastliness of her situation.

This is a perfect image of our present culture. It is what the cult of celebrity is all about – as well as so-called ‘reality’ shows (which of course are all carefully edited), talents shows and programmes like *Love Island* – an endless, desperate babble designed to spare society from acknowledging its own situation. Once, in ancient times, people looked up to the gods and goddesses to help guide and order their lives; then the gods and goddesses were replaced by angels and saints; now there is the pantheon of celebrities, each one in her or her own niche, each with their own adoring devotees.

Spiritually, perhaps above all, there is nothing wrong with the ordinariness of a *via media*, a middle way; if we aim too high, if we struggle up to too great a height, we lose touch with the everyday reality that is humanity’s common lot. I once heard the priesthood described as a ‘lofty vocation’; but if that is where we are, on a lofty perch, where else can we look but down? On everybody else.

In his Fr. Brown story *The Hammer of God*, G.K. Chesterton tells of a pious, good-living parish vicar who

killed his blasphemous, promiscuous drunk of a brother. In confronting him with his guilt, Fr. Brown speaks of the vicar in the third person, saying that he once knew a man who used to pray with others before the altar on the ground floor of the church. However, he grew fond of praying in high and lonely places. He was a good man, but while viewing the world from his lofty perch, he began to think that he had the same viewpoint as God and had the right to judge his fellow human beings. Moreover, he had a powerful force at his disposal, namely, the force of gravity. Because of this powerful force, it seemed to him that he was invested with divine power. He saw his brother way below on the ground and his heart became angry and bitter at this tiny, ant-like speck of a person who so troubled his life and, in an instant, he dropped a hammer which flew down like a thunderbolt from heaven and struck his brother dead.

Of course, we are all called to holiness; however, with the exception of the Communion of Saints, whose visible sanctity is there to inspire, encourage and strengthen us, true holiness is always invisible. You can never see it – you can only be touched by it in the human encounter.

I thank God for ordinary time. In certain ways I'm like a hobbit – not physically (obviously, I hope!), but temperamentally, definitely. The hobbits were lovers of ordinary time: their hobbit holes were comfortable and

cosy, the larders were always well-stocked, the lamps went on in the evening and there was a fire in the hearth. Hobbits never had any adventures and nothing unexpected ever happened to them. That is music to my ears.

So when, only a few weeks after the extraordinary adventure of Our Lord's birth, I turn the page in the missal and read 'Ordinary Time', I am not displeased. Besides, it was the hobbit, after all, who saved Middle Earth – and that was *because* of his ordinariness, not despite it.