

P.S.

**D**URING THE COURSE of a lifetime it is estimated that the average male will shave off twenty-five feet of facial hair. That's a lot of beard, and it's a lot of man-hours in a lifetime spent in front of a mirror with razor in hand.

There's no doubt that shaving is time-consuming and tedious. What man *enjoys* shaving? There are so many more interesting things one might be getting on with. There's no wonder, then, that in French the vocabulary of boredom draws on the language of the razor. *C'est la barbe!* (literally, 'It's a beard!') means 'What a bore!', 'How boring!'; *rasant* (literally, 'shaving') is an adjective meaning 'boring, tedious'.

Of course, it's not just shaving. The fact is that life is full of such activities, unrewarding in one sense, and such a waste of time, yet so necessary in another. Cutting one's toenails. Filling in a tax return. Keeping a record of training and competence for an employer. Cleaning toilets. Ironing shirts. Painting the fence. All of them have to be done, but most of us much of the time would rather not.

The essence of all this is captured in the book of Ecclesiastes, one of my favourite portions of Scripture with its 'tell it like it is' examination of human existence. "This sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith" (1:13). And indeed we are exercised. We get up in the morning to chores such as washing, dressing, feeding, making ourselves presentable. We rush out to work and fill our day with vain activity. We return home tired, to cook, sort out the kids, feed, clean, sort out paperwork, organise our partner (perhaps!)—and then, maybe then, do something we want to do. This is life for many people, and to some extent for us all. It is an 'exercise', a vanity, an emptiness. God has made it that way.

He's made it that way to remind us what we are: servants of sin and born to trouble as the sparks fly upward, bent on a pointless course that leads (without Him) only to the grave. There is no meaning in endless cleaning, shaving, washing, working, sleeping; yet these things necessarily form the framework of our lives. We are bounded—hemmed in—by these activities. They simply must be done, meaningless as they are in any deep sense. But He's made it like this, too, so that we can see the pointlessness of it all and long for something better. How

## It's a beard!

can it be that a human being, intellectually, morally, artistically, aesthetically and spiritually capable of so much, must be shackled to such activities? So much capacity in the heart and mind of a human being, but a life which contains so much that is mundane. There must be more to life than this.

And indeed there is. We shall do those activities, and we shall see in them the irony of our situation. But we shall know, too, that these things are not at all (as we wrongly said earlier) the framework of our lives, but are merely things that we do as humans, freeing our minds for a greater existence and a fuller future. They bespeak our humanity, but they do not hem us in. We shall not be overcome by the futility of life, but shall instead give thanks to God that this very futility has enabled us to perceive more acutely His eternity and glory. This too is part of the message of Ecclesiastes. Understanding the limits and pointlessness of human life lived under the sun (and the constraints that such a life entails) enables us to lift our heads to appreciate our redemption and to ensure that the time we do have to engage in more rewarding activities will be time spent wisely.

There is another point too. One of the great challenges of modern life is to find the time to reflect upon God and our walk before Him, to meditate on the course of our life and to set it against the one set by our Lord. When so many stimuli crave our attention, perhaps these mundane chores provide just the mental space we need to refocus our lives and to consider our ways.

So the male beard and its constant requirement to be shaved is in some respects a decent metaphor for human life: full of tasks and chores which seem to offer little reward and take so much of our efforts. Facial hair doesn't stop growing until the day we die; it is an inexorable component of life, in much the same way that Adam's legacy with all its sorrow lives on. But the ever-growing beard has its lessons. There is indeed more to life than shaving. The life of a disciple transcends those mundane matters, liberating us to see His wisdom in making life the way it is and enabling us to taste some better thing. Even those hours spent in front of the mirror or the ironing board can in some measure be hours dedicated to Him.

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