

Antiques

If I'd woken up that morning, and realised I would be buying oriental pornography by lunchtime - accompanied by someone else's wife - I think I might have stayed in bed.

We were at an antiques fair, along with *my* wife and this lady's husband. The lady had spotted this book, and felt it would make an ideal birthday present for her old man (he is passionate about many forms of oriental art, and is innocently amused by their attempts at erotica). We left our respective spouses in the café, and went back to the bookstall.

My part in the transaction, was to look scornfully at the book and then drive the price down. I'm good at that – the idea is to leave dealers feeling that I'm doing them a favour: I'm paying them a few quid *and* removing the tasteless junk, so it can be disposed of properly.

I asked my friend to pay for the item, but at this point the vendor decided to engage me in conversation. Whether he thought he recognised a kindred spirit, or because he was just very interested himself, he started telling me about some of the unsavoury practises favoured by our oriental cousins. Explicitly (and it *was* explicit) he majored on the activities of Japanese soldiers whilst on campaign. Seemingly unaware of his surroundings (and of our discomfort) he warmed to his theme...and spoke ever louder. His last words (which are unrepeatable) were actually shouted, as we desperately tried to lose ourselves in the crowd. I've never been in such a rush to leave an antiques fair. But the incident proved one thing: you can't *really* die of embarrassment.

I wouldn't be surprised if that dealer *did* assume I shared his interests. When I used to commute to Romania with my driver (Phil), every time we pulled up for petrol the car would be mobbed by young ladies. We eventually worked it out: I looked the sort of guy who would gladly pay for a bit of female company.... and Phil looked the sort who would have to.

People often judge by appearances, and it's happened to me often enough. As a prison chaplain, there'd sometimes be a head-count when I was taking a session - followed by panic: There'd always be one prisoner too many, with nobody in charge. I obviously fitted in rather too well. I went to preach up the valleys, and the guy in charge took one look at me, and went off to get his "approved" list of speakers. "Are you sure you're *that* Tom Pridham?" he asked, pointing to my name....as if I was likely to be another one, who just happened to be passing.

Of course, God never judges by appearances. If *he* was like that, Christ would never have compared the Pharisees to whitewashed tombs, or to cups which are outwardly clean but filthy on the inside. Instead, he would have been impressed. He'd have spoken only to 'the respectable', rather than to all those sinners he hung out with. And he would endorse those today, who tip up bright and early for the morning service, in their Sunday best...but never give him a moment's thought during the week. He would approve of anyone who makes a show of religion, anyone who is superficially 'good'....anyone who pays lip service. But God looks on the heart. He looks on mine, and he looks on yours. What do you suppose he sees?

