

According to one of the more maudlin saccharine songs of that perennially popular crooner Elton John, Sorry seems to be the hardest word.

This of course is not true. Enmity, with just one more letter is a much harder word. As are constabulary, discombobulation, entrepreneurship and otolaryngology.

If you struggle with the unpronounceable, don't become a priest. One of the main tools of the priestly trade is the Bible, and open up the Bible, and you are met with a whole universe of unpronounceable monikers, more tongue-twisting names than you could ever shake a stick at, and believe me, if you take a close look at some of the characters in lurking scripture, you'd want to make sure you had a sturdy stick ready to hand any time you were likely to meet them.

Senacherib, Abinadab, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Truth be told, almost any name from the Old Testament, especially, is more of a mouthful than 'sorry'. Probably all those wars so lovingly and lavishly described in the cantankerous rustling pages of scripture were caused by somebody's name being mispronounced just one time too many.

*"It's 'Mel-chi-ze-dek' mate. You call me Melzedekchi one more time and you're for it..."*

Anyway back to Elton. One does not expect great intellectual insights from a pop song; but nor does one expect it to be quite so wildly inaccurate on matters of articulatory phonetics.

Obviously, though, before you rush from your seats *en masse* to shake some sense into me, I do know that Mr John's song is not really talking about how any particular combination of letters is any more difficult to get your tongue round than any other. So often do we have to use the word in our lives that in fact, 'sorry', is one of the first words we learn to say and it never taxes our tongues after about the age of three. Instead what can make such words hard, of course, are the sentiments that lie behind them. So 'sorry' becomes a hard word to say when to say it means admitting to yourself and to someone else that you've been a complete and utter b—ounder, that you've hurt them out of sheer selfishness, that you're not, in fact, the fabulously good guy you would like to think you are. It's not the letters, it's what's behind the word.

Apologies aside there are lots of other things that are emotionally difficult to say, things that we struggle very hard to tell people. All those things that you sit on for years, that take an eternity to come out, that fear keeps hidden away, all the time and care and dedication taken to hide the elephant in the room, the essentials that we always want cover up, all those thoughts and feelings that dare not speak their name. Time this morning for me to talk about one of those difficult things, the thing I've been avoiding talking about, skirting round for the three or so years now I've been here.

With some of you, I've already had this conversation; others may have picked it up on the grapevine, but the time has come, after all these years of silence to talk to you this morning honestly, openly and frankly. Deep breath. About money.

Churches need people, they need prayer, they need love and they need money. Yes, followers of Jesus are in the world not of the world. But we are still in the world and so, therefore, is the church. Churches need money.

Angels do not swoop down from heaven on the last working day of every month and deposit little bags of gold in the vestry; even in this internet age there is no monthly BACS from heaven. We don't even, unlike Elijah, have ravens bringing us bread and meat in the morning, which is probably on balance, for the better. Nor despite popular belief is the church already rich. Yes, the Church of England is a landowner in this country second only to the Crown, but that land comprises almost entirely of church buildings and churchyards, both of which are far more financial liabilities than assets.

It costs a lot of money to keep even this little backwater church here at St Mary Beddington ticking over. Something like £100k a year, if we paid everything we should, which of course we don't, because right now we can't.

Before I go any further I am going to be clear, that, in this matter I am an interested party. Not because, in a roundabout way, what you give each Sunday helps to pay my wages. Not because bishops and archdeacons smile on clergy whose parishes are awash with dosh though they do, so they've never smiled at me. No, I am an interested party because, as your pastor I have a responsibility, along with yourselves of course, for your spiritual health. And although money of itself is as dead a thing as the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision, our relationship with it is of vital importance to our spiritual health and thus our relationship with God.

You are no doubt all familiar with the Gospel story of the widow's mite? Here's a recap from Luke:

*Jesus looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."*

There are two things we need to see in this tale. The first is that which Jesus makes clear: that the widow gave much, much more than those who were rich even though numerically she gave less. That is always a good thing for the poorer parishes to hear. The second thing we need to see comes from the first. The widow's mite was but a drop in the ocean of the Temple's finances. But that wasn't the point: the point was not what her giving did for the Temple, it's what her giving did for her. Those pennies might have meant all sorts of things to her: hot food that night, more time to buy off the landlord, new shoes for her children: it might have meant all sorts of good things but for her God's work meant more.

You will probably be expecting me, at this point, to ask you to dig deeper and put more in the collection plate, but I'm not. What I would ask you is in some ways harder than that, it is to aspire to be that widow, to let God's work, to you, mean just that little bit more more each day.

So I'm not going to ask you to give more money. I don't know who gives what, but I'm pretty sure you give generously. There is one practicality I will encourage, which, if you're not in it already, is to be part of the Parish planned giving scheme. This means envelopes, weekly or monthly, or bank standing orders.

A long time ago, almost another lifetime, when I was just another bum on a pew in a church in Stoke Newington, I was asked to join the church's planned giving scheme. At first, perhaps like some of you today, I was offended. 'The church should be free' I thought. 'How dare they!' Then I got over it and joined the scheme. I pledged to pay so much per week. It was hard. At the time I was temporarily on benefits, so it wasn't very much I *could* give. But having that envelope there each week meant that I didn't do what I almost certainly would have done without it. Which would have been to find something else to spend the money I intended to put in the collection on. I'm like that. Unless there's something like that little manila presence there to

remind me, I'm likely to find all sorts of better things, in the short term, to spend my money on.

I'm still like that. What I do now is even better, given my propensity to always find something better to spend my money on, which is a standing order. Each month, without me really ever noticing, a certain amount of money wends its way automatically from my bank account to this church's. I know for a fact that if I waited to see how much I had left at the end of the month and gave that, I would end up giving nothing. And yet I do really want to give from what I have to God's work.

So, the standing order. That's my solution. Now I'm assuming that you're like me, at least in that you want to give money to support the church. You may have better self-control than me, you may not. But if you're not already in the planned giving scheme, give it some serious thought.

There we go. That wasn't quite as painful as I thought it would be. I hope it wasn't too unpleasant for you. Sorry isn't the hardest word to say. And neither, surprisingly, though with just as many letters, is money.