

You may think that being a vegetarian is something of an unnecessary self-imposed deprivation, a doing-without when you don't need to, indulged mostly by tree-hugging tent-dwelling anarchists called something like Swampy or Moon-Child or over-sentimental anthropomorphists with several screws loose. That may or may not be true, but it has its up sides. There's no arguing that being vegetarian is certainly nicer to animals: even if you pamper your pig, it's a dead certain bet that he's not going to thank you for one day eating him. There are reputed to be health benefits to a meat-free diet, which may or may not be true; I am certainly living proof that it's perfectly possible to be a vegetarian and overweight, but you never know, if I ate burgers as well I might be heading for mega-obesity faster than you can say Eric Pickles. It's much better for the environment to avoid animal products- animals create enormous quantities of greenhouse gases, and other wastes; talking of which, it's much less wasteful of resources- instead of feeding an animal first, you can just cut out the middle man and feed yourself.

However, what, as far as I am concerned, is one of its great advantages is rarely mentioned those who proselytise the more caring diet. This hidden good side is not the benefit to health, or the ethical superiority or the environmental friendliness.

The advantage I am thinking of mostly comes to the fore if you go out to eat. Your eschewing the pleasures of flesh causes great pleasure, diversion and entertainment for your dining companions as well as giving them an enormous sense of well-being from helping someone less fortunate, as the hunt is on, the menus are scoured, the staff grilled, the search called for 'something a vegetarian can eat.' It's always nice to see people happy and occupied, but there's more, much more to the vegetarian eating out scenario. You see one of the great but unsung advantages of being vegetarian in Britain is the lack of choice. Not for the vegetarian the 20 minutes dithering when confronted with a simpering smorgasbord of menu choice: you search for the solitary item with the small green 'v' next to it and that's your lot.

Let me stress here, I'm not complaining. I know it's my own fault there's not much eating-out choice for a herbivore. I've chosen to impose that dietary rule on myself, and I only have myself to blame. But to be honest, there is something deeply comforting about having a lack of options, of not having to make your mind up because it's already been done for you. Life is just so much easier when your options are severely limited. Harsh and unsympathetic, you might say that's a bit of back-to-the-nursery infantilism; on the other hand we might counter that tolerating a limited range of choices might just be the sign of maturity that is not stamping your feet in a grand mardy tantrum when you don't get your way. Rules, even self-imposed ones, may limit your options, but that's very often not a bad thing.

I have gained many good things over the years from following the rules. I've learned to be a passable cook by the simple expedient of sticking to the recipe in the book. I have a basic competence in music because that art is all about knowing what the rules are and knowing when to break them. I have even overcome my horror of being in control of tonnes of deadly metal hurtling round the roads mere seconds away from certain death by endeavouring- much to other drivers' chagrin I have to confess- to follow the rules.

If life is duller, less spontaneous, more unimaginative, the compensation is that most things tend to be better and more effective, when you follow the rules.

There is, however, I think one glaring exception to this rule about rules- there's always one isn't there- and though you may be startled to hear it here, that exception is religion.

This might surprise you. After all, you might think that that's what religion is all about. Orthodoxy, orthopraxy: from Buddhism to Judaism, from paganism to Hinduism, from Islam to Zoroastrianism, isn't faith all about doing the right thing, believing the right thing, writing the rule book then following it and keeping your nose clean? I don't think so. You can keep all the rules and regulations, follow to the letter every law, statute and ordinance and still be a complete and utter Godless expletive deleted. And I hope you'll agree, the whole point of religion is *not* to be a complete and utter Godless ED. In fact, quite the opposite. So if you can keep the rules and still be a complete and utter Godless ED, then, clearly keeping the rules cannot be what religion is all about.

Which is why it is a fortunate felicity indeed to be a Christian. Considered as rules to be obeyed and things to be done, Christianity is impossible.

Think of the Sermon on the Mount. If your right eye leads you to sin, tear it out. If your right arm makes you sin, tear it off. Give to everyone who asks of you. Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, deny yourselves, pick up your cross and follow me. And the crowning impossibility "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

That is not a rule of life, that is a set of impossible ideals, so get real! It is simply not possible to be a Christian. It isn't. Not if perfection is what it takes.

And to know that really does help. Because in order to come to Jesus, we have to know our own inadequacies, our own deficiencies and inadequacies; we have to deep-down get it that none, not one of us comes before Jesus with anything to boast about, with any claims to godliness, or with the slightest teeniest weeniest chance of being holier-than-thou.

So now we've got that out of the way what, I wonder, is possible for those who, like you and I, would follow Jesus, but would very quickly have no arms, eyes or anything else left if we decided we had to follow the instructions to the letter? We're starting the official countdown to Christmas today, the only time of the year most people have Christ on their lips without swearing, and over the next three weeks or so lots of people who would never normally set foot inside a church will find themselves where you are right now, rears going uncomfortably numb after sitting too long on an improving pew and complaining about the draft from the door. If the unlikely happened and one of them asked you, 'what's this Christianity business all about then?' what would we say? We can't really say 'what it's all about lad, is, if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out'. Maybe save that for their next visit. So what can we say?

Well, rather to my surprise, at least, here comes St Paul, managing to stay on his horse this time and riding to the rescue.

Each time you hear read in church the Apostle's letters- it happens quite a lot you may have noticed- each time you hear those words there seems to be quite a lot of 'do this' and a lot more 'don't do that' in there. You might think that Paul is encouraging his flocks to keep the rules. But what rules? Did Paul deposit a hard-back rule book with the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, the Romans or any of the rest of them and expect them to read, mark, learn, inwardly digest and more to the point scrupulously follow it? Well if Paul did leave that book, his congregations must have quickly managed to lose it, because it's never been heard of since. No, if we want to know what those instructions were, we need only look at what Paul prays for for his people in the very first letter he wrote that we still have:

*"May the Lord be generous" he says "in increasing your love and make you love one another and the whole human race as much as we love you."*

So it's quite straightforward. St Paul's instructions were 'Love one another'. Sound familiar? Should do. It wasn't one of those things he dreamed up during a bad night on the Greek coast suffering the after effects of excess ouzo and undercooked

octopus. It wasn't a quick-fire response to some localised problem in the eternally and universally fractious early church like 'do we eat meat sacrificed to idols' [answer, yes] or 'should we get married?' [answer, not unless you really can't keep it in your trousers]. Paul was simply reiterating the words of Jesus at the last supper.

*"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

Every time we meet together as Christians we repeat some words of Jesus from the last supper. Perhaps we need to hear these other ones a little more often too. They bear constant repetition.

*"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

We cannot live our lives without messing up. We can never achieve the goals we have been set. We cannot be perfect. We cannot become Christians by keeping the rules. *Apart* from that one.

*"love one another."*

So in the event that in the next few weeks one of those occasional visitors to our church asks you what they need to do to be a Christian, you have your answer. All you need, indeed, is love.