

Easter 2018. About 12 noon. Imagine the scene in rectories and vicarages, presbyteries and parsonages all around England. Clergy returning home, the fullness of Easter joy finally giving way to fatigue; priests and deacons, Readers and ministers frazzled, semi-delirious and incoherent running on empty for so long that they're now actually the seeing angels- which *are* normally there- riding on the back of pink elephants, which are not. Even the energy boost of a much fuller than usual church is ceasing to be effective: the only job left to do is to chase out the stragglers, double bolt the church doors, come home and collapse. Should you want a clergy person to agree to something they wouldn't normally go within ten miles of contemplating (I don't know, a sponsored abseil off the church tower, an attempt to break the world record for singing Cliff Richard songs, taking next Sunday's Eucharist in a leotard) this is when they are at their most vulnerable. So emotionally battered is your priest that if your outrageous suggestion doesn't just bounce off a solid wall of fatigue, almost anything you say, will be agreed and almost anything you say will be believed. If you were to say "That noise during your sermon was Archbishop of Canterbury slamming the door as he stormed out" the response would be 'That's nice'. If you said 'There were 26 million people at the Eucharist this morning, that's half the population of England came to St Mary's today' it would be greeted with a feebly raised eyebrow and 'I thought it went rather well.' If you said, 'Mabel saw an apparition of the Virgin Mary at Sunday Club which told her to look in the cupboard in the kitchen and at the back was a hoard of gold coins' you might just get a response of 'well that will help with the parish share' before the snoring started. I know as clergy our bread and butter is believing lots of almost unbelievable things, but right after the last service on Easter day, that is the moment you can get us to believe absolutely anything at all.

So Easter 2018, about 12 noon. I stride up the drive to the Beddington Rectory, shooing out of the way the herd of pink elephants congregating there who want to congratulate me on my Vigil Mass exultet impersonation of Louis Armstrong, and open the front door to be greeted with:

"Well that's your career ended then."

Huh? You've not been talking to the ABC have you? Why on earth are you saying that?

"All that swearing in your sermon. You'll never get away with that. You've gone too far this time"

Once I had with a supreme effort of will forced myself to stay awake I listened to the unfolding of Wei-Wei's Easter tale, which was approximately this.

All was proceeding well- suitably very jolly and joyful until I climbed into the pulpit. Near the beginning I had, as usual, taken an Easter-sermon swing at Margaret Thatcher- it's almost as well established a tradition with me as Christmas Cliff-

bashing. According to my significant other this year the annual appearance of Mrs T was seasoned with a small but unmissable bouquet of piquant profanities.

I hadn't noticed at the time, it *certainly* wasn't in the script but at that point on Easter day I would just about believe anything at all. there was a certain plausibility. After all 1) I had in previous years entirely unknowingly said 'ey up' during a sermon, which although it's not swearing it's also unconscious and still embarrassing. 2) I'm not exactly known for my love of the 1980s occupant of 10 Downing Street. and 3) in my 52 years on earth I have both learned and used one or two words not to be used in polite company.

So, for ten minutes or so this Easter Day I was almost convinced that I had let out a string of profane invective in the most inappropriate circumstances and that the first item of mail to land on my doormat come Easter Tuesday would be a letter from the Bishop inviting me to explain myself- but without swearing this time.

It took me a while to realise, but eventually it dawned on me that had I actually said 'Mrs Thatcher, stay 'the ****' put' one of the other 200 or so people in church that morning might just have mentioned it to me- one or two of you might even have cheered-, in clouds of giggles the choristers would certainly have repeated it endlessly and I really wouldn't have had to wait till I got home to find out about it. A hasty email to my Churchwarden confirmed this analysis. There was no swearing in the sermon. The thing was, Wei had never before heard me mention the former prime minister *without* an accompanying garnish of gratuitous expletives, so his brain- on auto pilot- just auto-completed what it normally heard. So used has Wei become to hearing Mrs T's name accompanied by four letter words that his brain mistook every occurrence of that name for a four letter word. 'He's going to mention Maggie. Here come the swearwords'

And I almost believed that I'd effed and blinded in the pulpit, because I'm well aware that I'm so used to cussing Conservative politicians that I only really half notice that I'm doing it to the point where I can't imagine not doing it. In the end those words become like the white space in a printed sentence: always there but never noticed until somebody points them out. It may seem like stretching a comparison rather far here, but, hey, it wouldn't be the first time you've heard me do that. We find such words and usages in religion all the time: not swear words (though there are some), but words that are always there and we are always saying, but that we end up not really paying attention to and we often assume are there even when they are not. Such a word is Love.

If you want to sum Christianity up in one word, that word is Jesus. And if you wanted to sum up in one word what Christians believe about God, that one word is Love. As St John's letter says 'God is Love, and everyone who loves is of God.'

Love, the be all and end all of the Christian faith, Love the word so often unsaid. It is love that comprises all the white space in your Bible- the space between the words,

between the sentences, in the middle of the 'o's and under the arches of the 'm's and curling round the 's's. It's there so completely that eventually we sort of mentally paint it out and find ourselves concentrating instead on the tiny dots of ink, the other stuff, like marriage and family and tradition and liturgy and hierarchy and sin and orthodoxy and heresy and blasphemy and on and on. Which might all be important stuff to think about, but those words on the page of our faith are just meaningless scribbles without the contrast of the page they are written on, and the page is comprised entirely of love. Without love, the whole of scripture just falls apart.

Now with swearing it's clearly not a terribly smart thing to do to allow your use of it to become automatic. But not so with Love. How wonderful it would be indeed for our listeners to hear love every time we speak. Too often they hear anxiety or smugness or to our great shame, they hear hate. How wonderful it would be to hear love every time we speak

So if we've reduced our faith and what our faith thinks about God to one word, let's continue the continue our miniaturisation and reduce the commandments of our faith to one sentence. It can be done, and it's the sentence we hear- hopefully loud and clear- [in the gospel this morning. You weren't imagining it.][in St John's Gospel]. If you don't listen to any other bit of the gospel, listen to this. Disengage autopilot, turn off auto-complete and give it your undivided attention. Tune out the noise and hone in on the signal. Jesus says:

'Love one another, as I have loved you'.

When Wei heard me swear in my sermon on Easter morning he was, like the rest of us, a person in possession of a primate brain that hasn't quite caught up with modern life, one possessed of all those tricks that help a small nervous mammal out on the savannah to survive, go forth and multiply. We start with know-it-all before proceeding to the shortest route, rule of thumb, cutting corners, filling in the gaps, bare minimum, on a wing and a prayer and fingers crossed. It can be hard to hear truth cutting across the cacophony of common sense and evolutionary advantage, our brains always flitting between lazy ape, scared ape and selfish ape.

'Love one another, as I have loved you'.

Scared ape has other things on its mind. Lazy ape hasn't noticed. Selfish ape has no problem with 'I have loved you', - that's rather nice, it's all about me- but is having real problems getting to grips with 'love one another'. This ape is just a bag of selfish genes. But it doesn't have to be.

Forget your evolutionary ancestors, override their auto pilot and take back control of your brain, because Easter is the new creation and in the new creation selection is based on just one thing. Love.

'Love one another,' Jesus says 'as I have loved you'.

This is the new creation. Go forth, and multiply love.

Fr Andrew Fenby