

Today, I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear, it's going to be one of those sermons that I occasionally like to drop in your lap of a Sunday morning where I'm ask you to do some of the work. I know you were planning to use the next ten minutes for some pleasant reverie and it's taken you much time and a lot of hard work to perfect the art of sleeping with your eyes open and your face fixed in a look of rapt attention, but indulge me today and I promise not to do it again for at least a week. It won't be heavy duty work, I'm not going to ask you to conjugate Latin verbs or strip and varnish the pew you're sat on. I just want you to think about the most important person in your life who isn't yourself. It's almost like the daydreaming you were expecting to do. The most important person in your life. The special one. It might be a family member, it could be a friend, at a stretch a pet, though if it's your pet goldfish you could think about getting out more; most likely the apple of your eye is a spouse, partner or other variety of lover. Now you've got that person in mind, here's the question. Tell me. Before you start panicking and eyeing the exits, I'm not going to descend from the pulpit, grab the Sunday Club microphone and go vox pop; think of it more as a thought experiment.

So. Tell me. Why is that person so important to you? What is it about them that's so special that you've chosen them above all others to perch on the top of your personal pedestal?

For the sake of not making things too complicated I'm going to concentrate what follows on the significant other of the spouse/partner/lover kind, but I'm not privileging this relationship above other forms of bonding— goldfish fanciers do not take offence— but please adjust your thinking accordingly if where I'm going seems inappropriately embarrassing when thinking about your chosen one.

So what is it that makes your pulse race, your heart go all aflutter and the rest of you all swoony when someone mentions your swain's name? I know if you've been married more than a year that effect is distant past, but I'm sure you with a little effort you can remember back to those heady days when he always lifted the toilet seat and the snoring was cute.

So what's so special?

Well you might start as so many affairs of the heart do with something like 'he's very handsome, beautiful eyes' (or beautiful teeth if your significant other is a pet).

To which I will reply- I didn't tell you about this bit at the start otherwise you wouldn't have played along with me, and now you're committed, but for everything special about your chosen one I'm going to go completely out of character and play contrary northerner and point out why you're wrong.

Where were we. 'he's very handsome, beautiful eyes'. So he's a real looker. Nowt special about that. The world is full of beautiful people- just look around you.

Well she has a great sense of humour- always makes me laugh. So did Ken Dodd, but you didn't marry him. Nowt special about that.

Well he's very kind to me, always helping out, saying nice things. That's not exactly a unique attribute is it. Lots of people are kind. Probably most people sitting here today think that their chose one is very kind. Nowt special about that.

I could go on for hours but that's enough to make the point that all those things that we might think are what make our significant other great are things that many many other people have too. Even if you think what's great about them is that they can eat ten pickled eggs in a minute, that's not a unique skill. Take a trip to Halifax. So why them? Why them and not somebody else?

If you haven't walked out or told me where I can stick my pickled eggs by now you might say something like

Well yes there are lots of other handsome, kind, talented people in the world, but she was the one who was waiting at the bus stop that day, he was the one who asked me to marry him, not somebody else. That's what's so special.

So we've arrived at the conclusion that this most special person in your life, the most magical person in your world, was, erm, available. Nowt special about that.

There are psychologists who study affairs of the heart. They are not terribly romantic souls. They're more calculators than cupids and when they look at our pairing off, they claim that, given the number of people now in the world, if , taking speed dating to a whole new level, we could meet every one of them, each of us would fall in love thousands and thousands of times. This strongly suggests that Mr Right is, indeed, Mr Right now. Logically, whatever you may want to believe, there is *nothing* particularly special about your significant other. Prince Charmings are two a

penny, and in love we are profligate and pennywise. That is the hard edged scientific reality.

But you know it's not really true.

Whatever the objective reality might be, however you stack up the statistical evidence to the contrary, you know that that person *is* special in a way that all those other people who tick all the same boxes isn't. You can't explain it, you can't prove it, none of the answers you will give are ever going to be adequate to prove it, and the scientists (and contrary northerners) will always say otherwise, but it's still true.

There are some things you can't prove but you, with absolute certainty, know. That's why I've made you do some work this morning and taken us on this little jaunt down lovers lane, because I think it illustrates something important about the nature of how we know things, something very important to our *faith*, something that is much easier to understand thinking about our love for someone else than with technical theological terminology like epistemological hermeneutics. If you mention your faith to a sceptic their response will inevitably go down a similar line to our contrary Northerner- prove it! And you can't. Ever.

Here's the rub, an admission and a half. As a Christian, I don't have the answers to life, the universe and everything. As an Anglican priest I don't have the answers. If that sets you wondering what the point of a theological college education is, I hasten to add that I can regale you with the official doctrine and dogma of the church, which are answers of a sort, but they are the sort of answers of the level of 'my husband has beautiful eyes'- not, as we have just decided, very helpful ones.

I don't have the answers. But I know there *are* answers, that there *is* something rather than nothing, that there *is* more to life and love than passing on your genes, suffering and death. Though I don't know *what* those answers are, I know where to start looking, where to start that search that I know will be life long. I hope you're not expecting me to say 'start by looking in the Bible'. Or in the church, or in the latest initiative to waft down from Lambeth Palace. False starts each and every one. Where we start looking is not in the chatter of Christian history but somewhere in the quiet of a heart at prayer, where the only sound to be heard is the sighing of the Spirit.

If anyone in the last two thousand years wanted to be able to say to people 'here's the proof, here's the answer' it was St Paul, the greatest of all Christian missionaries. He really wanted to prove it. But he couldn't and he didn't. He knew that if you could give those answers, if you could offer that sort of proof, then whatever you were talking about, it wasn't God.

Here's what he says to the Christians in Rome:

*For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience*

Christianity is not about believing something improbable or impossible, it is not about old men in the clouds with beards or sky fairies or imaginary friends: it is about believing something unknown that remains unknowable except by the Spirit interceding within us with sighs too deep for words which is something, by its very nature - as it says on the tin - cannot be explained in words. And although you can't explain it or prove it or even less likely persuade someone else by rational argument to believe it, it is there and as certain as the love you have for the most important person in your life. And equally inexplicable. So faith. You have faith, but cannot, rationally, explain why. Don't worry. It's not because you're gullible or childish or intellectually lacking. Your faith is the reverberation so of those deep sighs of the Holy Spirit praying in you.