

Words, words, words. Powerful things words. There are just 26 letters in our alphabet, less than three handfuls. Not many, really, and not all of them pull their full weight, but those 26 can be combined, arranged and rearranged in a seemingly endless variety of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that are then invested with the power to tell us everything from how to make cupcakes, what time it is and where the toilets are, to who we are, that our spouse promises to be with us till one or other of us die and what it is like to meet God.

They can flatter (you don't look your age) and preen (have you lost weight?) fill you with light-hearted optimism (it's Tuesday tomorrow') serene joy (it's Tuesday today) or quiet satisfaction (still only Tuesday teatime). Words can be wonderful things: so much happiness built from such tiny building blocks.

It's not all happy, happy, happy in wordland though: they can evoke the full gamut of human emotion - it's not just the up stuff they provoke and evoke. Almost any human tool that can be used for good can be used for bad and words are no exception. They can be used to dish the downer stuff too, from panic (the Bishop's coming!) to derision (the Bishop's coming!) to mind-numbing tedium (the Bishop's *still* preaching).

Words can really make your heart sink too. Everybody's different. For you that sinking feeling may well be triggered by such phrases as 'Please sit for the sermon'. as I said, we're all different and you're a bit weird really. Here

are a selection of my instant dejection just-say-them-and-see-the mood-plummet phrases. 'The Bible says...' 'Now Jazz on Radio 3.' 'I know it's your day off but' or indeed 'I know it's Sunday 7:30 pm and you're just about to lock up but could we just have a look around'. Too many words in that last one, so taking back control of concise, with just three words let me introduce you to the ultimate in balloon deflating parade raining, passion extinguishing, hope snuffing, chastening, crushing disheartenment. Three words: 'Christian Legal Centre'. It's not a generic phrase, it refers to a particular organisation. You've probably never heard of them- lucky you- but without realising it, you've probably seen reports of their doings. Every time there's a story about Christians taking somebody to court either claiming that they are being persecuted or that they're not being allowed to discriminate against a minority group; whenever there's a story on the news that makes you have second thoughts about saying 'yes' if someone asks you 'Are you a Christian?' at work tomorrow- every time there's such a story on the news, the Christian Legal Centre are behind it 'supporting' (read encouraging) the hapless litigant in their almost always hopeless legal battle to defend 'their religion' (read bigotry).

I'm raising this because I think it would be entirely understandable that if someone is all over the news media saying 'I am doing this because as a Christian that's what I believe' you may either think 'Oh, well, maybe I need to think that too' or perhaps even worse 'well I don't believe that, perhaps I'm not a Christian then, or at least, not a real one.' Or if you've not yet taken the plunge in the font and have wandered in here for lack of

anything better to do on a Sunday morning/evening 'OK, well nice building, great music, but I think I'll give this one a miss'.

This week the Christian Legal Centre were behind the news story when it emerged that a couple on the Isle of Wight have withdrawn their children from school because one of the children at school sometimes dresses as a boy and sometimes as a girl. Their son was getting a bit upset and confused by this and, anyway, their faith tells them that boys should be boys and girls should be girls. So they're suing.

It gets a bit more interesting (or depressing depending on your perspective) as this is not the standard victim story of Christians standing out against a persecuting secular world. The couple who have withdrawn their child from school because they are Christians have withdrawn their son from a Church of England school. Whatever else you might say about Auntie of Canterbury, it's unusual to say she's not Christian. So on one side of this dispute are people who are claiming they have to do something because they're Christians: and on the other side people claiming they have to do the exact opposite... because they are Christians.

Now in his 1st letter to the Corinthians St Paul has quite a barney about court cases:

I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, but a believer goes to court against a believer?

So. Not a great situation. How might we resolve this?

Let's start first with some words and head over to the Bible to see what the problem might be. The problem (as so often) starts with one verse of the Old Testament, where in Deuteronomy Moses says:

A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God.

Fair enough. That's pretty clear. Ish. Except it isn't. Let's ask this question. What is it that determines what is a man's apparel or what is a woman's apparel? Moses doesn't tell us that, which is probably good because otherwise we'd all be here today dressed up like Ancient Israelites. Moses doesn't tell us nor anybody else in the Bible: what tells us what dress is appropriate to a male and what is appropriate to a female is the culture we live in. And right now in the UK, even on the Isle of Wight, in the 21st century the dominant view of that culture is that girls wear what they want including trousers and boys wear what they want to including dresses. So a man wearing a dress is a man wearing men's clothes and not breaking any Mosaic injunction.

Not convinced? Let's try history. Right up till about midway through 1066 the English reckoned that Norman males were a bit girly. And they were stupid enough to think that was an insult. Why were the Normans girly? Because they cut their hair short and wore trousers, rather than doing the manly thing and wearing a tunic (=dress) and long hair.

Now I'm going to be generous, *really* generous and assume that it's more than just one Bible verse that's got us into this quandary. It's a conflation of this (or other verses) with the idea derived from John's gospel of Christians 'in the world, not of the world' and the notion of being salt of the earth and light to the world. What this can become is the notion that Christians should not be afraid of being 'counter-cultural'- which they shouldn't- but if you're not really careful it can quickly turn into something as absurd as sueing your kids' school over a boy in a dress.

Back to 'in the world not of the world.' You won't find that exact phrase in the Bible but it's a fair summary of Chapter 17 of John's gospel. There are two ways we can try to live out this concept. The first is to be in the world for the bits that we like, and apart from the world for the bits we don't like. To this viewpoint the world is a sandwich: we can eat the tasty seeded roll but scrape off the potted meat filling. One manifestation of this way are groups like the Amish; another, the Christian Legal Centre.

The other possible view is less sandwich and more recipe. Christians are the vital ingredient in the world recipe, but in order for the cake to bake

we must become part of it. We can't just sit by the side on the worktop: we must intermingle with the world, be not apart from it but a part of it, distinct but transforming.

Till the sorry invention of Puritanism in the 16th century, the 'recipe' model had pretty much always been the stratagem of all of Christians, from St Paul onwards. That's how Christianity started out a tiny Judean sect and became a world religion— by adapting to changes in cultures and circumstances as they occurred. 'I have become all things to all people' St Paul wrote 'for the sake of the Gospel'. All the way through his letters it's clear that the last thing he intends for his converts is that they are 'countercultural'. That wasn't the scared Uncle Tom-ism of a persecuted minority desperate to fit in. It was a smart move. Because however much we think we can transcend our culture, we are prisoners of it. We cannot but perceive the world filtered through the lenses of our culture, and we cannot understand God except through those same lenses. When you hear those tired old arguments trotted out every year that Easter and Christmas and- prime exhibit right now- Harvest Festival- are just Pagan folk traditions that Christians nicked, well yes there's something in those complaints. But that something is less stealing Pagan people's great ideas and a lot more like learning to speak their language. And we learned their language so we could tell them all about the *important* stuff in the Bible- like God is with us, and forgiveness and eternal life- while trying not to get stuck on the stuff that's also in the Bible which is nothing more than brittle broken shards of glass through which the people who wrote it

used to view the world- things about not yoking oxen and donkeys together, women not wearing men's clothes, and not sowing two types of seed in your vineyard.

This means we need to make a judgement call, yes, but it's not entirely arbitrary. God gave us brains. Most of us. We can work out what is the voice of culture and what is the voice of God. The Scriptures contain both.

Don't be afraid of the world. Keep an eye on it because it's prone to doing some weird stuff when your back's turned. Sometimes you *do* have to go against the flow, shout out about the ways of the world. Ever since anyone can remember, the world has been racist, sexist, homophobic, unfair, uncaring and cruel. Those things Christians must always stand against. But we debase our faith if we waste our resources worrying about gendered behaviour in six year olds. Most of the time it really should not be you and me Christian sister and brother against the world. Because if we're doing this Christianity thing in any way approaching the right way, we will be working within the world, working with the world, working to change the world into a fairer, more caring, kinder place. The sort of place where nobody cares whether it is a boy or girl wearing that dress.