

Sometimes an aphorism latches itself into our collective cultural consciousness and becomes proverbial because it is self-evidently true: there really is no point crying over spilt milk. Sometimes cliches become part of our mental fabric because, though their connexion to the cold-light reality of a situation may be tenuous to say the least, they- hopefully- help us to cope or make a situation seem a little less appalling than it might otherwise do. So even though our hooks become less efficient, our nets looser, saggier and riddled with holes, perhaps there are plenty more fish in the sea. Or perhaps the latest joy-draining drama to come muddy-pawed onto our carpets might be more bearable by becoming poetic, noble or romantic if we can convince ourselves that the night is darkest before the dawn, which, poetically at least, it sometimes is, even if scientifically never.

Occasionally some universally accepted globule of folk wisdom turns out to be not only wrong but actually unhelpful.

It simply isn't true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, whether those dogs are the actual slobbering barking half-crazed slightly whiffy genuine canine or the metaphorical slobbering barking half-crazed slightly whiffy human. Old dogs, it is true, get used to doing things a certain way, and dogs are by nature maximally lazy, but until a old dog ceases being a old dog and becomes a very new dog corpse a dog can learn new tricks. It may need a more imaginative bit of bait to get it going, but choose the right lure and before long that creaky old pooch will be dancing on tiptoe, balancing a ball on its nose and even happily using the internet. Even a shiba inu.

Which brings me to today's dose of Sunday Stand up. This week, I'm afraid I want to present you with a lightbulb joke. So here goes.

How many Christians does it take to change a lightbulb?
Change? CHANGE!!!?

How the world laughs at us. As far as popular wisdom has it, the wheeziest oldest dogs with the saddest of old tricks are always to be found in church. And worse, that manky old mutt is quite often snarling and bearing its teeth as it tries to protect something ancient, soggy and chewed beyond hope of recognition, while at the same time refusing to let you leave the room.

That is how the world sees us.

Sometimes, that is precisely how we are.

Sometimes it helps others to believe that, even though it is not really true.

And sometimes that wisdom is just plain wrong.

This morning we have been gnawing away at that well chewed treat that is the eucharist. Which is great: two thousand years of tooth marks and it still tastes good.

This evening we have been gnawing away at that well chewed treat that is BCP evensong. Which is great: five hundred years of tooth marks and it still tastes good.

If you weren't paying attention, or just skimming along the surface of this morning, you might be tempted to think 'old dog, old tricks' nothing ever changes. But then you must have missed the reading from Acts we've just heard.

In order to fully appreciate what's going on in this chunk of Acts we need first to head to the Old Testament where we'll see that for a long time the people of God had a code of living: not eating certain foods, behaving in a certain way, wearing certain things, doing and not doing certain things at certain times. This was what made God's people distinctive and through distinctiveness they were brought closer to God. Not tucking in to gammon with pineapple when all your mates were; never letting a cockle or a mussel pass your lips— these were things that would bring you closer to God. These were the ways you communicated your faith. And then. And then there came a time and a place when the exact opposite was true. There came a time when all that particular distinctiveness was no longer the way. We see that transformation, or rather we witness the realisation that the transformation has occurred, in the reading from Acts.

Once, not eating unclean animals brought you closer to God: now the opposite is true: now your lack of dietary restriction is what marks you out and brings you closer to God!

Peter had a vision on the roof: a great sheet descending from heaven with all sorts of animals on it. God tells him to get the barbecue going and Peter demurs. 'You know I can't eat that God, it's unclean.' 'Not any more it isn't' is God's response.

Now if this was *just* about food then that wouldn't really be that big a deal. Dietary restrictions can be a bit of a fiddle, but I can personally attest it's not a great strain to go through life never eating a bacon sandwich. It really isn't. But this *isn't* just about food. It isn't really about food at all.

At the end of his vision Peter is told in no uncertain terms:
'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

And then the Spirit tells the Apostle:

Not to make a distinction between them and us.

And just a bit later on in the same chapter of Acts Peter says
God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean

So, this whole vision is not about Peter being given permission to tuck into a prawn cocktail. It's not about food, it's about people.

Being labelled 'unclean' as a potential foodstuff is probably not a bad thing: it means you won't get eaten. Being labelled unclean as a person is rather different prospect. Being labelled an unclean person means that at the very best you get a lot less in life than what everybody else gets and at at worst your experience of life is nasty, short and brutal.

Foreigners. Sexual minorities. Women, most of the time. Sick and disabled people. Sinners. All were unclean.

But not any more.

Peter was a bit slow getting up to speed: he really shouldn't have needed the sheet vision to get with the programme. He'd been there for years watching Jesus making pariahs respectable- the woman at the well, tax collectors, sex workers, gay centurions, Roman soldiers- and making them respectable not by changing them, but by changing the definition of what is respectable, changing the definition of what is respectable by ignoring the very notion: refusing to acknowledge the rules of clean and unclean. God cannot be made unholy through contact with us: but we can be made holy through contact with him. And Jesus surrounded himself with all those people everybody else thought were unclean. He didn't hose them down till they were clean, scrub away their apparent spiritual pollution. They didn't have to change like that to enter Jesus' life. On the contrary he said in the clearest way, 'these people are not unclean'.

'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

Here is where Christians need to be careful. Because we've still got the Bible, still bearing it's ancient messages, we still know all the old ways of dividing the world into in and out, clean and unclean, pure and impure. There's a lot of that in the Bible. We should treasure it of course, but always remember that the scriptures exist to demonstrate to us that the whole point of our faith is to bring us closer to God. So that was how they did it then *but* that's not necessarily how we should do it now. How we should do it will be different. There is no clearer demonstration of this than Peter's sheet vision. Unclean to clean is a 180 degrees: a complete U- turn. If it wasn't in the good book, it would be profoundly un-Biblical. How we should do it will be different, and you don't get more different than that. That is the vision Christians are called to proclaim and what a vision it is. What a vision it is. Old dog, new dog: it should be getting us as excited as a dog with two... tails.

Nothing is carved in stone except that we must come closer to God. Coming closer to God was the purpose of clean and unclean, the tithes and the sacrifices and the sabbath; the law and the prophets. All about coming closer to God. And Jesus came to show us how to come the closest we'll ever be.

