

I'd hazard a guess that if there was a lesson you really, really hated at school it was mathematics. Unless you were me and then it was woodwork or PE. But, still. Maths: what a bore! We don't like maths. We don't *understand* maths because to understand maths you have to concentrate and concentrating... hurts. That's why you always start to get a headache about five minutes into a sermon when the jokes stop and the theological thinking begins. And maths is much worse than anything that comes out of a pulpit. Maths takes effort. Unless you've got the genius gene, you don't just look at an arithmetic problem and the solution is obvious. You have to use the grey matter. Which is just... too much like hard work.

This is why we can be so easily bamboozled by dodgy statistics (which is most statistics, especially those published by the Church of England). This is one of the reasons we fall for quick-fire sales patter in car showrooms and keep lapping up misleading bargains on Ebay. To do the calculations we need to to properly understand whether it's a fabulous offer or an outrageous con is too hard so we either make a wild guess or gladly take the ready made answer the spiv salesperson is offering us cos, he said 'trust me' so I'm sure he's right. Yes, we notice shrinkflation in the shops but that's not because we can do the cost per gramme mental arithmetic, but because we can see it happening- one crisp floating in a bag of nitrogen gas where there used to be two. It's the same price but smaller, no sums required. Maths, unlike looking, means exerting yourself. There must be so many more games of snap played than chess. So when it comes to sums and equations, calculations and computations we want it easy. Please. Just some simple addition and definitely no long division. Or three men and a dog going to dig a field instead of four. Or calculating compound interest, whatever that is. Something we can do on our fingers is best. We like easy equations.

Here's a church one. On the day of judgement, if your bad deeds outweigh your good deeds you will go to eternal conscious torment in hell. It's a brutal equation, but it's a simple one we can all do. It's nothing fancy, don't need to hire an auditor, just a simple matter of pulling out the ledger, adding up one column, then the other, then subtracting one from the other and... lake of burning sulphur if you're in the red. If you don't recognise that sum expressed like that you can always look at it: it's there in full colour gold, flames and naked flesh in that enormous reredos hiding behind the children's area. Just the thing for the developing infant mind.

It can't really be that simple, can it? Can it?

Leave it that easy and it would mean that you can do some horrendous stuff and then still get over the line by binging on do-gooding at the end, a bit like slowing down for a bit when you see the average speed check camera. It could also mean you can do very little in life, to quote David Bowie, I've never done good things, I've never done bad things, but one more harsh word than kind words and it's Gas Mark 99 for eternity?

Well the maths is simple but it's *bad* maths, at least to the extents that it's the wrong kind of equation for the problem at hand. Or perhaps, the maths is simple, but it's *bad salvation*.

The problem at hand, because we haven't quite defined it yet and you always need to define as many of your variables as you can in any equation, the problem, is sin, and salvation. To be very crude, not something I am very often, in the pulpit; to be very crude, how do you avoid a scorching for your sins and get to heaven instead?

First, let's deal with some of the apparently easy stuff. First, although sin is something that you can definitely find in the Bible, it's not always terribly well flagged. You would have thought at least one book would be a sort of tick list: this is a sin, this is not a sin. But there isn't. There *are* as you may well have come across, a couple of rather famous lists of things which seem to have made St Paul really riled. To the disappointment of some I don't really do hellfire and brimstone in the pulpit, but here goes. Just try and imagine an Ian Paisley accent.

*Neither the whoring, not idolaters, not adulterers nor feckless sensualists, nor men who couple with young male slaves, nor thieves, nor the acquisitive, nor drunkards, nor the vituperative, nor the rapacious will inherit God's kingdom. (1 Cor 6)*

*Now what the works of the flesh are is obvious: adultery, whoring, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, witchcraft, enmities, strife, jealousy, rages, rivalries, dissensions, heresies, envies, murders, inebriations, carousals and things of that sort... those doing them will not inherit God's kingdom. (Gal 5:19)*

Which sort of seems to be clear, except, well two things. First, erm, what does 'inherit God's kingdom' mean, precisely? Because what St Paul meant probably isn't anything like our conception of Heaven and Hell.

And secondly, when we listen to those lists, we tend to notice the really salacious, scandalous stuff: 'whoring, coupling with slaves, witchcraft, murder' and are too busy shocked that people actually do that sort of thing whatever it is that we don't really

take in that also included in the litany of condemnation is being jealous and being acquisitive and being drunk or angry and strife and enmity. And St Paul doesn't order his lists in any sort of hierarchy. Envy is as bad as murder. That's pretty hardline. No, that's extremely hard line.

And the result of this equation of sin is quite, quite simple. If those who do 'things like that' do not inherit the kingdom of God, then... nobody does. Show me a human and I'll show you a sinner. Remember there is no distinguishing the list items here, so we can't have recourse to your usual finger pointing: yes, I'm a sinner, but *you're* a bigger one.

Do the math, and we're *all* on a one way ticket to hell.

At this point I should be bellowing 'repent!' and passing round the collection plate. But then I think to find the solution to a problem you need as much data as possible and if the problem is salvation then our next stop should be Jesus.

In his brief earthly ministry Jesus regularly caused a scandal. One of the more outrageous things he did was he 'ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners'. It was a common accusation. All the people that, according to St Paul, wouldn't inherit his kingdom, Jesus sat down to table with. But, you know, perhaps, Jesus didn't eat and drink with sinners. He ate and drank with his sisters and brothers.

I suppose Jesus could have decided that he wasn't going to eat and drink with sinners. But that would have meant that he would be eating every meal on his own. Which would be great at breakfast, but we don't, in the end, like to eat alone, not all the time, and I doubt he would. But then when Jesus' opponents said he ate with 'sinners' what they meant was 'people whose sins are different to ours'. 'Sinners' is not a discrete category of person like 'tax collector' or 'shopkeeper' or 'bishop'. It's a synonym for human.

So, where are we?

Sin and salvation is not simple maths. It's not about what weighs more in the final balance. Much less it is like a computer game where you make one wrong move and it's game over.

Being a Christian is not following an equation, it's more about focus. We're followers of Jesus which is more about trying to be like the person he was than not doing what he didn't. Jesus was without sin, we are not, we can never be. Your task is to

become Christ like, to become more like him. You won't have accomplished your task before you die. You can't accomplish that task, ever. But you can become *more* Christ like, and the more Christ like you become, the less likely you will be to be envious or debauched or acquisitive, without having to spend all your energy resisting temptation. You cannot be without sin. You cannot make yourself never sin. But you can strive to be more like Jesus. If you concentrate on the goal, if you keep Jesus in your sights, set yourself to be like him, imitate the good stuff, the bad stuff will dwindle. It will never disappear, ever. But it will fade.

There is another list in the New Testament. This time it's not a list of things you shouldn't do, instead it's things you should. And it's Jesus list:

*I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me*

That's not a list of sins: it's a to-do list. How to be more like him.

Back to St Paul and his lists of things that will keep you out of the Kingdom. If it's all down to a sum of the good versus the bad none of us is saved. But then when we're weighed in the balance, someone has always got their finger on the scales, throwing them in our favour. That person is Jesus.

None of us can save ourselves: not by being good, not by not being bad. We are only saved through the love of Jesus.