

People ask silly questions. All the time, It's only because we all do and we know we do and we know that everybody else does, somewhat more than we do obviously but we're too magnanimous to say anything, we know we all do it, It is because we know asking a stupid question is the daily bread of social interaction that we are able to factor in that silliness and remain thus polite and generally unmolested as we go about our daily lives amid a haze of daft asks.

Can I sit here? Well it looks like a chair; if you can bend your legs...

Can you tell me how to get to... Yes.

We don't, do we, answer like that, unless we're feeling so grumpy we just don't care any more, because we know we ask as many daft questions as we are asked ourselves, though to be fair, 'Can I sit here' is not is not so much a stupid question as one intended to be polite and non-threatening. It's stupid because I wanted it to be. There is the other type of question which was not born stupid but becomes so in context.

My favourite which you've heard many times before, from my very first Easter sermon at St Mary's onwards was Maggie Thatcher on the campaign trail in south London stopping a black woman and asking 'where do you come from'. She deserved the reply she got: 'Tooting'. Also sharing this genome is the one asked of me after a coroners inquest, in one of the few times I have ventured into an East London pub wearing black clergy shirt and dog collar: 'so what do you do for a living?'

And then there is the stupid question which has no excuses; it's not that the answer is rude, it's not that the context is wrong, it's just, stupid.

Such as, those times when, as a gay person you are asked something along the lines of 'if you could take a pill and it would make you 'normal', would you do it?'

Your reply will depend upon your estimate of the person doing the asking. It's unlikely to be very high them having asked this question, but if the person looks like they might have a spark of intelligence behind their eyes one might say: 'I *am* normal. You just don't understand what that word means.' If you're feeling less benevolent you might want to say 'eeugh, don't be disgusting', which is, hopefully, the last thing they were expecting to hear and might, just might, make them think again about asking such a cussedly stupid question. Or perhaps you could ask a question in return, such as: 'if you could take a pill and everyone would stop being homophobic,

would you?’ Again, not the answer they were after. The answer they were hoping for would be something like ‘of course I’d take that pill, have you got any? I’d love to be normal like everybody else because I don’t understand the mathematical concept of ‘normal’ either.’

If I were to take it as a genuinely serious question, though hypothetical, as the pill can and will never exist, my honest answer would have to be, ‘no’. Not even if there was a time tunnel attached and I would end up born ‘normal.’ Because although that person who swallowed the straight pill would not have had to grow up with the thousand and one unpleasantnesses the 60s, 70s and 80s visited on minorities, or live through the Thatcher era in quite such a horrendous way, or indeed be threatened with the sack in 2024 if they get married— yes I know, time for the world’s smallest violin, but welcome to the Church of England— if I could take that pill, then that person would not be me. To mash up Martin Luther and Stephen Sondheim, I am what I am, and I can be no other.

There is a point to this, I’m not just ranting, and it’s a point relevant to all of us, a particularly sore point for those of us who would like to believe in a loving God, and the point is about suffering in the world. Stay with me.

God creates LGBT people as we are; what problems may come, what sufferings we have to endure because of that divine creative act are not baked in; they are the result of the way society treats us. So also for many disabilities; if we built the world differently disability if it were noticed at all would be mere difference; so for issues which dog people of racial minorities: race is a social construct not a biological reality.

There are, broadly, two kinds of suffering in the world. The first is those that *are* baked in, those that come from being an embodied creature in a complex interdependent biosphere in an infinitely wondrous world. So the various diseases that may ail us, our bodies eventually wearing out, the hardships and sorrows caused by volcanoes and earthquakes and storms and so on. We can mitigate these sufferings, even sometimes avoid them or reverse them- we can develop medicines, build our houses above the flood plain and earthquake resistant, but rarely can we prevent them happening. The lamb’s suffering is the lion’s survival. These sorrows and sufferings are baked in, part and parcel of God’s creation- not that God made the world in order for us to suffer, but they are, if you like, the price we pay for the infinitely intricate stupendous wonder of creation. It is, what it is.

And *then* there is the suffering that we ourselves create, the sufferings, big and small, that come from the actions of humanity: the pernicious effects of racism, homophobia, slavery, bullying, wars, greed, exploitation, loneliness, famine, homelessness, substandard housing and the diseases and disorders which follow from them: the list is long, the list goes on and time is short. God created us, true: and we created hate and neglect and exploitation and prejudice and selfishness. We: me, you; our parents and grandparent, friends, families neighbours make a world of suffering.

In his letters and Gospel St John frequently uses the term 'the world' as something opposed to God's work, opposed to Jesus, something that Christians must be separate from. This is 'the world' he means. Not the world that God made, but the world we have made.

It doesn't have to be this way.

What we have made, we can unmake.

The most important way for any of us to begin this unmaking is by being a Christian; *actually* being a Christian, letting the faith of this sixty minutes or so of a Sunday soak through into the other hundred and sixty seven hours of the week. It's great that you spend this time here every week or every other week or however often and this time is essential to your faith. Being here makes a difference to who you are and how you are, it really does. And the more this here soaks into the rest of your life, the better. Church starts the unmaking.

What else?

Open your eyes to what the world is like for others, because there's so much we don't know about how it is for others, and be warned, you will find it upsetting. Don't turn away, you need to know.

Small acts of kindness change a bit of the world and can be catching. You might not have a big effect on the world but you may well have a big effect on the person who is your sibling in Christ.

Looking at the bigger picture, voting does change things; those of you of voting age have the opportunity; try to think with your faith before voting. I'm standing in this

pulpit today rather than being locked up in in prison as I would have been in the England into which I was born because of the way people have voted. You didn't die in infancy from a childhood disease, you're as old as you are, because of the way people voted.

As one person we change little: together we can make bigger changes, gospel changes. Forget party politics, campaigns and movements can change the world; we blow trumpets together and down come the walls.

We can, we should bind the wounds of the broken. We must care for those for whom the world walks by on the other side. Foodbanks, for example, which have prevented many the poorest in our country from hunger, have been largely the work of people of faith, many Christians. They are immensely to the credit of our faith. But as Christians we look forward to the day when the last food bank closes, because they are no longer needed. they are first aid, and prevention is better than cure.

For the baked in suffering in the world we considered earlier - natural disasters and so on- we can only ever respond with care and compassion. But the sufferings that come from human greed, hate and negligence can stop. We have created that suffering, and we can unmake it.