

In two weeks time it will be Mothering Sunday- places are strictly limited- book your pew now! It's one of the two days of the year that Mass vestments (that's the priest's frock to you and me) turn from purple bling to shocking pink. This is not, as somebody was trying to suggest to me last week, 'pink for mothers' sexism on the part of the Church because 1) pink is for boys as well as girls (I should know) 2) wearing Rose on the 4th Sunday in Lent long predates keeping Mothering Sunday and 3) the church has so many other ways of being sexist it doesn't need to put its priests in pink to make a point. No, the change of colour on the middle Sunday of Lent is there to send a purely chromatic message: purple is serious, pink less so, because the middle Sunday of Lent is supposed to be a gift to us of a lightening of the solemn Lent tone before we pitch into Passontide and it all gets even more intense. A sort of liturgical hen's night if you like. So now you know if anybody asks why the vicar is wearing pink in a couple of weeks time.

This is however, the 21st century and our tolerance for sack cloth and ashes is not what it was so I thought twelve days into the season of penitence you might appreciate a little break in the gloomy self examination and we-are-not-worthy loops and we could play a game this morning, a sort of early Mother's day treat. I'm sure you're willing.

So we'll play a mini-version of Only Connect and see how you do. Hands up when you know what the connexion is.

Harden-Eulenberg. Dreyfus. Profumo. Chappaquiddick. Iran-Contra. Clinton & Lewinsky. Berlusconi Bunga Bunga. Homes for votes. Cash for questions. Cash for honours. Cash for influence. Christianity. Watergate. Rinkagate. Squidgygate. Camilagate. Phone hacking. Windrush. Cambridge analytica.

I'm trusting it's obvious that today I want to talk about scandals. Or one scandal in particular which you may or may not have noticed in that list, depending on how late you were up last night and whether you were checking your phone when I was reading the list out. Or possibly you didn't hear it squeezed between Cash for influence and Watergate because you weren't expecting it: after all our brains are renowned for their laziness and yours probably donned the eye shades and said 'wake me up if anything interesting happens' as soon as I climbed into the pulpit. Or it is possible I never said it in the first place, but that would mean I'm up here in the pulpit deliberately misleading you. Doesn't seem likely to me. So, scandals. Today, the second Sunday of Lent I want to talk about the scandal of Christianity.

You may not think Christianity is scandalous. I mean, look around you. Unlikely to upset anyone. Presumably you're not here expecting outrage or hoping that something deliciously outré is going to happen. If so, you're going to have to get used to disappointment. But back in the first century when the followers of Jesus became first a subset of the Judaism and then a fully fledged religion on its own, back then Christianity was a scandal. Take all the stupid scare stories Islamophobes nowadays peddle about Muslims, times it by 20, give it IV steroids, lock it in a dark cellar and feed it on your darkest fears for thirty years and you'd get what normal law abiding indigenous people thought about us in the first two hundred years of our faith. And the reason for their revulsion towards our creed was that they though Christians were thoroughly immoral. Even if not everybody believed those rumours about cannibalism and debauched love feasts pretty much all upstanding citizens still thought that Jesus lot were disreputable, depraved and unprincipled. (If they could see us now.)

Of course, mostly that was just unthinking knee-jerk prejudice: the way we humans always react to people who are different from us- thinking them anti-social, dirty, devious, disgusting, and immoral. But even the smart thinkers- and there were quite a few of those in the Classical world- even the philosophers who wouldn't be taken in by tall tales of human sacrifice -could see a real problem with this new faith, and that was its lack of morality. Sometimes people mistake morality for faith, but Christianity is not a moral system, it's a faith.

There then is the reason Christianity should be right up there in the list of all time greatest scandals. The people of the Roman Empire were right. Christianity is not about morality. Morality might be, if you like, a symptom of being a Christian- you'd hope that Christians would do the right thing- but like Typhoid Mary in perfect health but passing on the bacillus to everybody else, it's perfectly possible to have the faith and not have all the symptoms.

Christianity is not about 'this, this and this is bad' and 'this, this and this is good'. It's not about, if you are good enough God will love you and if you are not he won't. It's not about some sort of line you can cross either way, saved or damned depending on what you do or think or say or don't do or don't think or don't say. Our faith is not some sort of cosmic game of snakes and ladders where each ladder is one rung short and every snake slides you off the board. It's not about unforgivable sins pushing certain people past the point of no redemption. All have fallen short, all will

always fall short. There is no fallen olympics. It's like school sports day in reverse: everyone's a loser.

There are people who are locked away in prisons around the world who have done things horrifying beyond our imagining. And the ultimate scandal of Christianity is that nobody- even they- are beyond redemption, nobody is beyond the reach of Christ's outstretched hand.

This is indeed a difficult teaching.

Because we really do expect our religion to teach right from wrong, we'll want that tick list to tell us we're on the right side and the other lot aren't, we want it to be easy to understand - do this, don't do that. Even if it can be a struggle to keep the rules, we want to know in very simple terms where we stand and what we need to do.

But that's putting the cart before the horse, that's not what Christianity is about.

Christianity is a faith, which means it's about spirituality and worship and God. If what we do or say or think is good or bad it is because of what that thought or deed or word does to our relationship with God. It's about your relationship with God, about your recognition that the one important thing in your life is God.

Does it bring us closer to God? Then it's right. Does it take us further away from God? Then it's wrong, what we technically call sin. Look at what is called 'sin' in the Bible and you'll see that the thinking is always, 'this is what takes a person away from God.' Love God, love your neighbour: that is all of our faith in five words. If you love God, all the rest should flow from that: but you can't make yourself love God by keeping a lot of rules, by, to put it another way, simply being moral.

Sometimes without a doubt writers of our Scriptures became a bit confused and had difficulty telling their morals from their righteousness, bequeathing us the rather difficult task of trying to prize apart what in our sacred scriptures are the fundamentals and what are just the particular obsessions of a particular place, time and culture. Not an easy call, but we do need to keep making it.

There is a great irony in some expressions of Christian fundamentalism. Sometimes it simply subscribes to 'salvation by works' expressed in its negative form: 'damnation

by works.' Sometimes Christians will refuse point blank to agree that doing good can get you into heaven, yet don't shy away from saying that 'doing bad' will inexorably land you in hell. So how does that work? Life is all snakes and no ladders?

Neither is true: doing good will not get you to heaven and doing bad will not send you to hell. What's important is your relationship with God. The closer you are to God, the nearer you are to heaven; where God is absent, there is hell.

This is not a recipe for do-what-you-like make-your-own-right-and-wrong chaos. This is religion for grown-ups, this is faith that is weaned off spiritual milk. This is faith that recognises the difference between law and sin.

This is not an excuse for nihilistic hedonism. As St Paul wrote 'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial.' Doing what is morally right *should* be a side-effect of doing what is spiritually right. But, be sure that that's the way round to do it: start with the spiritual, then the moral comes gratis.

This is a faith that actually fits. It is a faith that can mould itself around differing cultural expectations, different moral codes, new understandings and discoveries and changing perspectives. It is a faith that allows our knowledge and experience of God to grow and to flourish as other knowledge and experience grows too. It is a faith that should be all ladders and no snakes. It is a faith that whose central five words- Love God, love your neighbour- can be summarised in one word. Love.