

*Icebreaker.* A special-purpose ship or boat designed to move through ice-covered waters, and provide safe waterways for other boats and ships.

So says Wikipedia.

What I say is:

*Icebreaker.* A tortuous psychological technique which the facilitators of a meeting / training seminar like to inflict on their attendees in the interests of exerting power and pliability through humiliation and torment.

Let's get to know each other:

can we go round and each share with the group something about yourself,

tell us something interesting that happened to you on the way here today,

Or if it's the Bishop

Tell me why you're being confirmed today. I'm told the trauma lingers

If you've never experienced the wretchedness of the icebreaker; count your blessings quick before I announce a round of testimonials. Icebreakers, are, let me tell you, a little known occupational hazard of formal ministry in the Church of England. Having had to endure the practice more times than I've had hot coals shoot from a thurible I have somewhere in my cranial vaults ranked memories of icebreakers past, from the bearable to, well, the rank. Today I'd like to share with you an icebreaker I experienced onboard HMS President which is not despite the name, a ship, much less one fitted for ice-breaking. HMS President would immediately sink if placed in the water, as it is in fact an office complex by the Tower, owned by the Royal Navy, who obsessively call everything they own a ship even if it's

the building next door which is TS rather than HMS, but still, apparently a ship. One day, perhaps, they'll weigh anchor and sail away across Beddington Park. Anyway, I was aboard the good ship President for the Sea Cadets Volunteer induction day. Hello Sailor. Before we got onto tying knots, and practicing our 'aaaaaaagh shipmates' there was the inevitable icebreaker to be got through. Which was this.

Tells us four things about yourself, three of which are true and one of which is a lie and we'll guess which is the porky. I can swear 5 different languages; I was born on the Old Kent Road, I'm a vicar and I live in South London.

Despite having pronounced the above in the broad northern accent i am tethered to, the room decided that the untrue statement was not that I was born on the cheapest square on the monopoly board, but that I was fibbing when I said I was a vicar. And no, they weren't aware of the technical distinctions between 'vicar' and

'rector' which almost nobody is apart from those in the office, but I'm happy to tell you if you ever have twenty minutes to waste.

Yes, I wasn't wearing a dog collar at the time and I don't think I resemble Dawn French even in a bad light but surely... something must show through? Apparently not. Although a part of me is secretly pleased not to be immediately Derek Nimmo and to be fair all the people in the room had to go on was what I looked like, if they'd been of the same opinion at the end of the day of singing shanties, it could well be time for me to make an appointment with the bishop and say 'your grace, I think we have a problem.' Happily, they meeting was fully persuaded of my ordained stature, particularly after I'd sworn at them in Polish.

There is a point to this tale, of course, there always is, and unusually today it's connected to one of the readings, but

before we go there, let's quickly call in at another part of the Gospel of Matthew.

There is a very odd parable of Jesus' there. Indeed there are lots of odd parables in Matthew, Come to think of it, it's hard to think of a parable that isn't odd. Part of the spec to be strange and thus memorable, at the same time as being odd enough to require a bit of work to get to the meaning.

Anyway, this strange tale will slither its way into the Sunday readings some time this year as the lectionary works its way through the first gospel, but it's in my head today as it cropped up in St Mary's somewhat individual morning prayer lectionary a couple of weeks ago now. I've heard it once a year at least for decades and it's still odd, strange and disturbing.

So, it's the tale of a king giving a wedding banquet for his son. He sends out the invites, but nobody wants to come- a bit like Back to Church Sunday, or a Stewardship Drive- and the invitees even rough up the people delivering the cards.

King loses his rag, sends out his soldiers to slay the reluctant guests and then gets his servants to go grab anybody they can and bring them to the banquet. So far, so good: clearly an allegory of the great and the good not recognising God when he comes among them. But then comes the really strange part. Someone is found at the banquet not dressed up for a celebration. What's the deal? asks the King. Where's your glad rags? The unfortunate underdressed guest is dumbstruck. So the king orders him to be bound and thrown into the outer darkness to, where there is, in that memorable phrase, wailing and gnashing of teeth. Cheery little tale.

What's all that about then? What's going on there?

Well it might connect with some mystical bits of the book of 1st Enoch about fallen angels, but then you've got to be seriously pseudepigrapha literate to work that out and that's not what parables are about.

What it's about is a question.

Why are you here? If you can't answer that question, well perhaps you shouldn't be here. And if it isn't immediately obvious why you're here and somebody has to ask you, then, again, maybe you shouldn't be here.

Since COVID, you may have noticed, even long after pandemic restrictions have gone, the pews in this church are quite a bit emptier than they were before. It's not just here. It's everywhere. There's no one reason for this, it's a combination of things, but partly there has been some self-sifting going on. People have asked themselves 'why am I here?' and they couldn't answer.

What Jesus is demanding in this and so much else of his teaching, is commitment from his disciples. There is no time for coasting along; no space for Laodiceans, neither hot nor cold; no use for salt that has lost its saltiness; no point in a lamp that is lit and then hidden.

Just in case you were worrying, being the light of the world and the salt of the earth isn't about some sort of highly-visible spiritual showing off. It doesn't mean talking about Jesus in every conversation or accosting random strangers to ask if they have seen the light. Not even for clergy.

But it does mean something, and when Jesus says it, he says it to *you*. You. Sitting here today. *You* are the salt of the earth. *You* are the light of the world.

Christians don't have to be unique, different from everybody else; immediately obvious before they even open their mouths. Christians don't have to be unique, they have to be Christian. That can mean being like everybody else, everybody's best side, but more so. Kinder, more forgiving, more generous, more willing to listen. Would you not want to be like that? I think you would.

Being a Christian isn't about being unique, but it is about knowing *why* you're like that, you're like that because of

Jesus. Being a Christian it means knowing where your treasure, where your heart is. And do it right, it means, without thinking, you'll be wearing the right clothes for the feast. It means, when Jesus asks you the question 'Why are you here?' you will not need to think before you answer 'because you invited me'.

Don't be afraid of what you are or what you believe. Be your best self: it's what you are, and it's what it means to follow Jesus.

Be the salt of the earth. Be the light of the world.