

If you have ever sat on a committee, or perhaps just watched one in action, you will know that, from Dibley Parish Council to the Parliamentary Scrutiny Committee to the Privy Council, they tend to be populated from a very limited range of people types.

There is the silent rubber stamper who has perfected the art of simultaneously looking engaged and sleeping bolt upright with eyes wide open, drifting into consciousness automatically when a hand needs to be raised to vote but otherwise spending their evening lost on an idyllic desert island while their body is in a draughty committee room. There is the knee-jerk trouble causer who will object to any proposal, possibly for the fun of it, but almost certainly on principle, whether it be something eminently sensible or utterly silly. Meet the grizzler who will, before the meeting starts, loudly bemoan the lot of those who must sit on this committee; and afterwards even more loudly sigh with relief that it is done. It is this individual's peculiar curse to find themselves always volunteering to sit on committees.

And then there is everybody's favourite, the proceduralist pedant. This is the person who appears to have eaten the rule book and is happy at any point to belch selections of it in your face at the most inappropriate and, of course, unavoidable occasion. So when agreement is finally about to be reached after a marathon 12 hour slog on an intricate but vitally important and potentially explosive issue, it is he who raises his hand and utters those magical words 'point of order', thus condemning all present to a further 12 hours rebuilding from scratch the delicate facade of agreement. It is she who, just as you are getting to Any Other Business will tell you that the meeting has been incorrectly called according to the 1568 Enclosures Act, is possibly illegal and, although nobody is likely to ever know if nobody tells them, she will. It is the procedural pedant who will take the most exciting initiative to pieces with the gusto of a dog attacking your vital paperwork, before declaring that it is broken and can't possibly be put together again. Although there is no committee involved it is just this sort of person that Jesus meets in the gospel passage we have just heard read.

The Sadducees were a rather privileged group in 1st century Jewish life having pretty much sewn themselves into a hereditary monopoly of the plum Temple jobs. One result of this was that the group had something of a lack of imagination about the resurrection life, hence that famous 'Whose wife is it anyway?' question you'll find in Matthew's and Luke's gospel a convoluted, laboured question about seven brothers each marrying their brother's widow and the resulting possibility of endless

litigation in the afterlife. It is a question any procedural pedant would give their eye teeth to be able to ask. Jesus often meets those who have some of the big things in life, and want the small things in the after life.

[Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.]

Now questions about the afterlife are not necessarily silly ones. It is a much cherished belief for many that they will be reunited with their loved ones after death, be that spouses, family or pets. It's an understandable and far from silly concern. But the Sadducees are not worried whether Mavis and Albert and Spot are happily strolling through the clouds of heaven together again: they are, so it seems, asking a stupid question, to point out, as they see it, how stupid belief in the resurrection is. What I would like us to consider today is *not* the argument we hear recounted about the resurrection, how it works, who is married to whom in the afterlife and whether cats go to heaven (they do, spiders don't). What I would like to do is, if you like, turn the sound down to an indistinguishable murmur and instead consider how our participants behave, or more specifically how Jesus does.

Ask yourself this question. What do you think you would do? You're teaching in the Temple. It's been a tense day. You've come this close to being arrested. Again. Up comes yet another group of hoyty-toyty smart alics with yet another irritating question. If you are honest, what would you do? I have to be honest and say, if it was me, it would probably not be what Jesus did.

Jesus does not roll his eyes to heaven and castigate his questioners for asking a stupid question. It certainly is, but he does not bark a bad tempered response at them. Yes, Jesus had his moments: he could lose it sometimes, just think back to that gospel reading for today. He doesn't shoo the Sadducees away with a superior put-down or belittle them for their short-sightedness. He answers the question.

One can hear many worrying things said in churches. Probably the most worrying is not 'I'm having doubts about my faith' , 'We haven't got enough money' or 'I'm not sure I believe that' or even something starting with 'There were once seven brothers'... It is not something one will often hear with a flush of embarrassment in the hushed tones of the confessional. It is usually said matter of fact; if not with pride, then certainly without shame. It runs something along the lines of 'I tell it as it is' or perhaps 'I call a spade a spade'. This is a shame, because it is said in a church, not a hardware store.

Honesty is commendable, but the fine line between honesty and rudeness, impatience and self importance is almost impossible to detect and is crossed every day in churches up and down the land and all around the world. And you know, it is rarely ourselves that we call 'spades'- indeed our 'commendable' honesty is usually reserved for others, and then only if we have something unpleasant to say. We tell it as it is only when it is someone else we are telling. We have no secret pleasure in being unpleasant: no we are merely being honest, and who can fault that?

Let us hear the words of St Paul writing to the church in Corinth:

To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

and again to the Romans

Let us [therefore] no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. Let us [then] pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour.

Do you feel that every time you step into a church that these words are written on the hearts of those inside? Are they written on our hearts?

It is hard, nay impossible to love all the people all of the time, in fact at times it can be hard to love anyone any of the time. But we are called on to try. If you pull down

a Christian lip the inside should not be a healthy pink colour, it should be bright red from it being bitten so often.

Look around you. At the person next to you, in front of you, behind you. We are not looking at gardening implements. We are surrounded by precious, astonishing, sparkling jewels, each as beautiful as a lily or a rose sometimes just as prickly but always just as delicate. Each person a moving, breathing breathtaking work of art. These are St Mary, Beddington, the living stones that bring this pile of old bricks to life, these are the living stones that turn this church's heart of stone into a heart of flesh.

So take a good look. Christ died on the cross for what we see right now. Not just for his disciples. Not for some abstract principle. Not for his own glory. But for...

And each time we let slip the sharp word, each time we snap at our sister's stupidity, each time we carp and snipe at our brother, each time we lack the energy to bite our lip, each time we tell it as it is and call a spade a spade we are telling Jesus 'well that was a waste of time, wasn't it'?

Christ died for the love of each and every one of us, and who are we to question his judgement?

St John in his first letter has this to say:

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

We come to this fine mediaeval-Victorian building to be closer to God and so we come to church to Love. Let us love one another.

Luke

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