

Although often dismissed as an urban legend, it is in fact true the Inuit dialect spoken in the Nunavik region does indeed have 53 different words for 'snow' (I suspect though that it's actually 52 and one might be the word for ice cream). However, 52 words for snow. Any more repeats of last week's weather and you may need to learn Nunavik yourself.

In warmer climes, the desert dwellers of the Sahara apparently have multiple terms they can choose from to describe their beasts of burden, where we with concise clumsiness have just the one word, 'camel'. In fact most of the words thought to refer to camels are in fact simply increasingly profane Arabic swear words. That apparently, is the only language the beasts understand. And they still choose to ignore it. Just like my dog.

Even for us in these reasonably temperate climes, the immediate environment shapes our vocabulary. And no, I don't mean the sudden stream of Billingsgate that appears every time you're out driving. As Anglophones, yes, we are somewhat limited when it comes to describing snow- one word and a few stock phrases such as 'I can't go to church in that' and 'Close the schools'. Even with a quiverful of Anglo Saxon curse-words ready for our bow we are hamstrung when trying to express the necessary nuance for distinguishing a recalcitrant camel, a reluctant camel and a right little... camel. But the English are not always wielding a linguistic sledgehammer: if Barry Humphries is to be believed, we do have 25 ways to say sorry and, according to Dame Edna's alter ego, we don't mean a single one of them. That may seem unfair: but not so. He was actually letting us off lightly. Not only do we dissemble when we apologise; we dissemble when we accept someone else's apology. We rarely mean it when we say 'sorry' and even less often do we mean it when we say 'that's OK, I forgive you'. We have even fewer words for 'forgive' than we do for 'sorry'. Though still only one for camel.

This is not *just* a problem for the English of course, but as the pew you are now sat in belongs to the Church of England let's keep this thing local and steer well clear that other English bad habit, blaming foreigners for our own shortcomings.

So, forgiveness. The thing about forgiveness is, like many of the good things in life, it's a lot easier to receive than to give. And unlike many of the good things in life- like love or Christmas presents, or polite niceties- forgiveness almost always comes without any prospect of reciprocation. You give a present, you expect to get one back; you give love, you hope for it in return; you say 'good morning Rector' you

expect him to say 'Good morning' back. With forgiveness though, we have to try very, very hard to give as good as we get. Not only can forgiving be a lot more emotionally costly to the giver than the receiver, it's also given with no realistic expectation of anything in return. To the part of our mind that is usually in control- that's the one that does the driving- nothing for something looks pretty much like a very bad deal indeed.

Now Christianity is certainly straightforward, but nobody ever said it was going to be easy. The fact that forgiveness- one of the things that comes least naturally to us- is one of the central demands of faith means that if we're really going to take this Jesus thing seriously, we've got one monster of an uphill struggle on our hands.

"How many times should I forgive my brother?" St Peter once asked Jesus. "As many as seven times?"

Hey, seems reasonable enough. Seven is a big number. You're going to have a really stinging face and a day-long blush if you turn the other cheek seven times. You're going to be pretty worn out if you go seven extra miles. Your wardrobe's going to be soon empty of cloaks if there are seven demands for your coat. You'd have thought 'seven' was a good offer, no?

Alas, 'seven' is nowhere near big enough.

Seventy times seven says Jesus. By the way, that doesn't mean count up to 490 then hit the blighter for all he's worth. It means 'a number of times so big you could never count it': basically, never stop forgiving.

So, the requirement is clear; forgive others. However, as Christians we don't just have commandments, statutes and ordinances descend on us from above without any wherewithal. We are allowed to question. So, why? Why keep on forgiving?

The answer? You are called to be perfect, as God is perfect. Imitate God. Forgive, because that's what God does. You're always offending him, always sinning against him, always up to no good. You'd almost have thought it was in your DNA. But you know every time you give him grief, God doesn't strike you down, he doesn't wreak his revenge: put succinctly God forgives.

Now here is a scandal, here is something which is just too much to take on board. It's very nice to think that one's slate is always being wiped clean, but to the human mind there's something deeply suspicious there. Do what I like and say sorry when

done? Actually, don't even need to say sorry, and forgiven anyway? It seems to fly in the face of what we take to be natural justice: do the crime, do the time. Perhaps that is why so many Christians prefer to talk about wrath and judgement and punishment. Blanket forgiveness just doesn't seem right. From the crimes against humanity that littered the last century, to the sadistic torture of the serial killer, humans do some terrible, wicked, monstrous things.

And God forgives them just like that?

He thinks that's OK does he?

What can we say?

First, it's really important to stress that the bad things we do are not irrelevant or trivial or negligible because God forgives us. They are still, and will always remain, terrible things. But that God forgives us means we don't have to keep going down the nihilistic spiral of rejection, revenge, rejection, revenge; Cain and Abel to infinity. It means that God our Father gives us the opportunity to grow up, to be adult about it, to confront what we have done without fear of punishment, thus, hopefully, loading the future in favour of our *not* doing it again. God's forgiveness makes it *less* not more likely that we'll do whatever it is again. Not the threat of punishment, but his forgiveness.

I know it's a little difficult to make that make sense, so let's take a scenario. You want to do something bad. I don't know, say you want to hit your younger brother. He's really annoying you, that is the younger brother's rôle in life, at least I've always taken it to be mine. However, you're in the living room watching the telly with your mum and dad and you can't just go and whack him one, because you'll be seen doing it and if you are seen, you will be punished. So you don't do it. But you aren't not doing it because you no longer want to do it, or you actually think it is wrong. I mean look at him! He's asking for it! You are not doing it in order to avoid punishment. Expand the scenario out, change the components with an infinite range of combinations and it's pretty much a constant of human life. You want to do it but you might get caught and punished. So you either don't do it but keep on wanting to do it, or you start looking for ways of doing it without being caught. Little brother, just come and look at this interesting thing I've found in the kitchen.

That is the hardwired human background, and what God's forgiveness does is irrevocably interrupt that process. I know it's sort of counterintuitive, but still. God's

forgiveness removes the threat of punishment, so now you don't have that excuse. God's treating *you* like an adult, and gambling on the possibility that you might *act* like one given half the chance. God made you, he knows how you work, so he knows there is a good chance. You still need to stop doing it, but now you have to actually confront yourself and stop and not give yourself the excuse of not doing it because of the threat of punishment.

God's forgiveness is not a 'get out of jail free' card. Don't make that mistake. What it is, is a second chance, stuck on endless repeat until you finally wake up, smell the coffee, get the message and do the right thing.

And here's the last counterintuitive surprise. The 'right thing' is not to not sin. The threat of punishment may well work quite well there. But 'not sinning' is not the aim of the game. Not sinning is not doing anything bad, but 'not doing anything bad' is not necessarily doing something good. The point is to become better, to become more like Jesus, to become more Christ like. To come to the point where we too are the sort of person who in the depths of our agonies will pray, 'Forgive them Father, they do not know what they are doing.'

It's a long, slow slog to get to that point, if we ever do. But it is forgiveness not the threat of punishment that best moves us down that road. And so the first step on that journey, is for your heart, truly, to accept God's forgiveness. Not as easy as it sounds, but the offer's always there. What do you reckon? What do you say?