

Contrary to what all the stereotypes might lead you to believe, I am not a fan of musical theatre. I know I'm letting the side down but there is something that just fails to click about the sheer implausibility of a drama that suddenly bursts into song (which opera shares but gets away with by being implausible right from the word 'go'). Worse, this artificiality comes, with one or two exceptions, matched with the musical equivalent of candy floss: all sugar high and nothing more. I would find it difficult to imagine a worse evening out than one spent listening to show tunes, unless one was doing it trapped in a lift with Andrew Lloyd Webber just come down with food poisoning.

And yet, maybe it is in the genes after all, there are times when I inadvertently get the absurdity of it, times of sheer facetiousness when I find myself suddenly bursting into song, just like Julie Andrews, minus the off-stage orchestra, the lederhosen made out of old curtains and the ability to sing.

But it happens. at times of stress verging on hysteria- a SMYL week in Carrotwood, a three hour interview with the archdeacon say- and I find myself unconsciously and often inappropriately bursting into a chorus of 'Yes, we have no bananas' or 'Hold your hand out, naughty boy' if the situation has a vague connexion to a word in the ditty. 'Father, someones stolen the lead off the roof and the churchwardens are so upset they've resigned, might occasion a mature adult response of stressed out but grim faced determination to weather this latest storm... But it could just as likely be greeted with a chorus of 'Yes we have no church roofing'

Happily for my chosen career, this tendency rarely comes to the fore when I am reading the Bible, partly because the activity is rarely stressful, and because even if you're trying really hard, it's not easy discern a jaunty hit tune in a passage about how God is going to wreak his vengeance on Ephraim, or launch those worship the beast into a sulphurous lake of everlasting fire. Not even Tim Rice could make a lame rhyme out of Revelation. But if you can, let me know. However, just once in a while the scriptures give up a song, and such a scripture, preposterously enough, is one we heard a selection of today, Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, specifically this bit.

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.*

The temptation is too much. A generation's defiance of persecution, Lady Gaga's 'Born this way' for the baby boomers: how could I read that line and not find a song on my lips?

'I am what I am'. Taking stating the obvious to new heights, in some ways this is a ludicrous statement. Patently, Paul is what he is: if he wasn't then he wouldn't be what he is, he'd be something else. Taken literally 'I am what I am' is a statement without any real meaning. But as all savvy scholars of the scriptures know, words don't just have literal meanings, and what 'I am what I am' meant for Saint Paul- and indeed for subsequent generations- including those who have had a less than happy relationship with the Apostle's writings- what it means is 'this is who I am, I cannot be any other way'. A leopard is born with spots, a zebra has stripes, a hedgehog spines and a rabbit big ears. I am like this, and that is that.

The question is, can a statement like that really be true? Are we, our personalities, fixed in stone, are we the words in a stick of seaside rock, is what we are written in indelible ink in our DNA ?

And the answer, you are probably not going to be surprised to hear in an Anglican church is, I think at least, yes. And no.

Some things that make us 'us' really cannot be changed- our race, our sex (bearing in mind that for trans people it's the case of right sex, wrong body), our sexual orientation. And some things can. In terms of personality, there is no real 'you', There is no real 'you' that cannot be in some way modified, there is no real you that cannot be changed for the better, or less optimistically, the worse. You can't turn a dog into a cat, but you can teach it new tricks.

It's really important, in order to avoid frustration and disappointment to be clear about what can and can't be changed. A lot of time has been wasted and a lot of tears shed trying to change things that can never be changed. On the other hand we've allowed so much to stay the same that shouldn't because we've assumed we can't change. And although we have a depressing propensity to keep doing the same stupid never-learn things over and over again, most of the time there's nothing really that says we have to. In so many ways humans can change, in so many ways we can be better

I don't mean that we can be anything we want- prime minister, pop star, bishop if we put our minds to it and believe in ourselves: the world doesn't work like that and it never has. Nor do I mean that we can all be rich and successful if we work hard and persevere because those things come our way in life thanks to chance and luck: the world's like that and it always has been.

But the way we are, the people we are, the personality we project and inhabit: that we can change.

There is no 'real' you. To prove this, all I need is a piece of white plastic- this is all I need to change you. Even more miraculously, this is all I need to change me.

People in churches always seem to be rather nice people to me. It can be difficult sometimes for me to square that with arguments, falling out, backbiting and so on that I know are the day in day out of human communities, churches being no exception. But you all seem lovely to me. That's not because I am a uniquely saintly person that always sees the best in all people no matter what, it's not because I'm particularly stupid and can't see what's right in front of my nose, it's because because of those 18 inches of white plastic that are circling my neck when you meet me. However else you may behave at other times, other places with other people, you sort of tend to behave yourself in the presence of a clerical collar. And believe it or not I tend to behave myself a lot better than I often do when I'm wearing it.

Some might say that this is simply hypocrisy: you pretending to be good in the presence of the vicar and him pretending to be holier than thou, but I don't think so. I don't think any of us are pretending. I think that there's something about the clerical collar that brings out the best in people, and who's to say that you when you're on your best behaviour isn't in fact the real you? At the very least it's just as much the genuine article as the you that will find themselves swearing at someone the ASDA car park, losing your temper with your kids or trolling the Bishop on Twitter. Though I might do some of those more often than you do.

Let's just park that a moment. Remember where we left it though because we'll be coming back real soon.

The Christian faith is not about becoming saints, being do-gooders, doing the impossible. It is about unlocking human potential, about realising the potential to be Christ-like that inheres in each and every one of us. Being in Christ is not about

becoming something we are not: it is about becoming more of what we already are. The good parts, that is, the God parts.

Although it might be fair to say that any creed that can dream up such concepts as original sin, total depravity, substitutionary atonement and eternal torment could be said to be pessimistic about humanity, nothing could be further from the truth of our faith. The Christian faith is an immensely optimistic one, it sees what we can be, what we are becoming; it sees the transformation of the resurrection life and says 'that's us'. This is where we've been, and that is where we're going. And God is doing it for us and God is doing it within us.

You may have heard it said that 'if you are a Christian you must...' or perhaps 'you can't be a Christian if...' Nonsense. To be a Christian is to be one thing: a person becoming more Christ like.

There is a real 'me' for each and every one of us but what is the *real* 'me' is the 'me' that God sees. When we change to become more like Christ, we see more of that self too. The more we become like Christ, the clearer we see. In the timeless words of St Paul:

*Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.*

And in his less often quoted words: *'I am what I am'*.