

The exception, they say, proves the rule. Which contrary to what most of us believe, doesn't mean that if one thing bucks the trend it means you're right with the rest of it. Prove, here, means test: an exception comes up to the rule, gives it a funny look and says 'Are you sure?' It means that when you have something that doesn't play by the rules, doesn't fit the template, then the usefulness of your rule will depend on how well- or not-you can deal with that exception.

So the exception, the awkward so-and-so, the cussedly- difficult bloody-minded one, I'm sure you will be glad to hear, far from being an annoyance, is essential to the idea of getting it right. What is most informative in any given situation, and certainly most interesting, is when it doesn't quite go to plan, when the production line turns out an oddity, when one of the sheep breaks ranks and bursts into a song and dance routine, when Cliff Richard releases a decent tune. It's the square peg that teaches us that the hole is normally round, Heston Blumenthal that teaches us the joy to be found in of a plate of egg and chips.

So let's hear it for the misfit, raise a glass to the maverick and eulogize the oddball for helping everybody else get it right.

If you're a fan of the eccentrics, the screwballs and the freaks, then you're in the right place: not for the people- perish the thought- but for the literature. After all, there are some pretty oddball books in the Bible, the Old Testament, particularly. Why don't we start with the book that is most likely to be found left on its own, languishing in a corner and mumbling to itself is Numbers [from which our first reading today was taken]. It may be the strangest of the Old Testament books but that's rather like naming somebody the oddest competitor on Big Brother: it's a crowded market. The stories of Numbers, are set in a weird and wonderful almost alien world, the tales made even more jarring to our modern sensibilities by being told in as blunt a way as is possible. [The passage we heard this morning is a good example.] {The story of the poisonous serpents is a good example. You're unlikely to know it like the back of your hand, so here's the gist.} The Israelites as usual, are grumbling. This gets God's back up so he sends poisonous serpents to punish the Israelites. Moses steps in, God relents and cures the snake bites by the curious means of a brass serpent on a stick. It wouldn't win any prizes for elegance or subtlety. It's a crude sketch of a bizarre tit for tat exchange between God and his chosen people.

And it doesn't stop there: so as the story of the Israelites wanderings in the wilderness progresses through Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua this pattern

repeats over and over again, punctuated only by some very long pauses for extensive law giving. The Israelites, displaying an signal inventiveness, find ever novel ways to offend God. God responds, equally inventively, and the Israelites find themselves bitten by snakes or consumed by fire or swallowed up by the earth. Moses intercedes, God stops. Its crude, and sometimes its brutal.

What on earth can we take from this? How can we as Christians respond to *this* word of the Lord? If we're not going to go down the oh-so-tempting slippery slope of pretending that the Old Testament books are not really our Scriptures what can we then think? Not only are parts of our sacred texts not the most elegant of literature but they apparently paint a not very pretty portrait of our God. This is not a picture of a caring, creating God but a petty, vengeful, even nasty God. Is this really our New Testament God, the God that St John says, is Love?

Well, we might come to the conclusion, that no it isn't the same God. It can't possibly be. The world, after all, is not a very nice place. It's full of poisonous snakes and creepy-crawlies galore and bacteria and viruses and animals killing and eating each other and pain and misery and suffering. *And Donald Trump.* So perhaps this is actually an *evil* place. And perhaps then if this is an evil place, then perhaps it was created not by our good, Loving, New Testament God, but by a nasty Old Testament *evil* God who not only makes a bad world, but traps souls in it and seems to positively delight in inflicting misery on his chosen people. You can see the line of thinking. Bad world = bad god. Good God, that is NT Jesus, = good world, therefore NT God can't have made this world.

It's a mistake that some made very early on in the history of Christianity. Starting with a chap called Marcion who had a very slimmed down Bible indeed (Luke's gospel and some bits of Paul), for a century or two this was a reasonably popular idea. It was the people who believed this who wrote many of the so-called 'lost' gospels like the gospel of Judas or Mary Magdalene that get conspiracy theorists terribly excited.

The idea of creation being the work of an evil God is like Calvinism in that it seems to be based on an impeccably logical succession of ideas. It's logical, and of course, like Calvinism, it's completely wrong. All our Scriptures, Old *and* New Testaments speak of only one and the same God. Jesus is quite explicit - in all his I AM statements in John's gospel - in equating himself with the God of Exodus, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob. And equally explicit in stating that God is good.

So perhaps we're not seeing into the real heart of Exodus's picture of God if we shudder at its crude brush strokes and apparently brutal God. Let's turn, to help our understanding, to that piercing beacon of modern illumination that is Monty Python.

*All things dull and ugly
All creatures, short and squat
All things rude and nasty
The Lord God made the lot*

*Each little snake that poisons
Each little wasp that stings
He made their prudish venom
He made their horrid wings*

This is what the Scriptures tell us. God created the world, he created all of it, and what he created, he created good. And that includes the snakes. But better than that, it's not just all some chaotic mess: it's not humans and snakes and hornets and lions and lambs all haphazardly thrown together in a biting nipping sniping stinging killing frenzy. It's a creation with coherence, with God's purpose built into it- even the poisonous bits. Now it's easy to think that if it's all God's work then the biting and stinging and nipping must be punishment, and this thread of thought is tangled up in huge swatches of the OT and the New. Though that *may* be a way of understanding the less friendly flora and fauna of the world, it doesn't exhaust the possibilities of understanding. Because the coherence of creation goes further than all being made by the same hand. In a vibrant, bustling, lively creation there are plenty of bumps and knocks waiting for its residents. And sometimes God provides remedies, the means of healing, whether its the work of leucocytes and antibodies or a brass serpent.

And so when humankind had added its own handiwork to God's creation and made a real mess of it; when we had made ourselves a real humdinging, hopeless, noxious, noisome disaster world of sin; when, as the old Prayer book confession puts it "we have done those things we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us"; then God steps in to provide the remedy. Only this time, the remedy for our ills is not a snake on a stick, but his Son on a Cross.

Back to the beginning. You , Christian brothers and sisters are misfits, Oddballs. Exceptions to the rule. In a world that celebrates greed and selfishness, self-centered-

ness and narcissism you are bucking the trend. In a world where the strong prosper and the weak go to the wall, you worship a powerless man murdered on a cross. In a world where we murder our neighbour because of the race they come from or the language they speak or the faith they follow or the way they love, *you* believe you must love your neighbour as yourself. You test the rules of this world, and you prove those rules wrong.

To He who on the Cross died for us...