

Fr Andrew Fenby

They're rumoured to be the best years of your life, which suggests we're really not setting our sights very high. Regardless of whether they are the best years or the worst or just something to be gotten through, schooling swallows up the vast proportion of our tender years. Is it all worth it? Spend 5 minutes gawping at the news and you might begin to doubt the point of education. Start listening to the supposedly highly-educated people who are allegedly in control and it won't be long before you're asking out loud:

“Just what did you they teach you at school?“

The three ‘r’s obviously: Reading, writing and rioting. Mathematics, science, maybe a foreign language, citizenship, technology, if you’re really lucky music and if you’re really unlucky woodwork. That’s just the formal bit. Most of the learning at school takes place away from the narrow dictates of the curriculum and the pedagogic purview, most school learning is those lessons in life that make the academic look like child’s play. Algebra? No problem. Picking a sports team? An exponentially more challenging endeavour.

So, forgetting the formalities, school mostly teaches you how to deal with other people- making friends and influencing people, avoiding bullies and thinking up excuses; how to keep secrets and who to tell them to and particularly important, how not to get caught. You learn that as regards fashion, the line between stoopid and cool is vanishingly thin and constantly changing. By high school you have learned how to do pedantry and most useful of all as a preparation for later life, the playground teaches you four letter words.

You can’t beat a good four letter word. Trust me. They’re just the right size, satisfyingly symmetrical. Cut one down the middle and there’s two letters each side—beautiful symmetry. They take almost no effort to speak and slip rat ta ta ta off the tongue. They do need to be handled with care, as they’re not always the right word for every occasion and a central skill to the correct use of the four letter word is always being in control of them. Grandma’s will be horrified if a 6 year old let’s slip what they’ve actually learned at school today.

Caveats aside, you can’t beat a good four letter word. Trust me, I’m a curé (the only four letter word for my profession I could find that was suitable for church).

Today, I'm thinking of a particular four letter word. No, not that one. Or that one. And certainly not that, not unless a bishop suddenly sticks her head round the door.

A particular word.

Had we been in church I had thought to have the younger members come to the front and shout out whatever four letter words came into their heads until they got to the one I wanted, but then their families might have been surprised what kids learned in the playground- I said the playground because they certainly didn't learn anything like that in church.

However, circumstance beyond our control mean we're not in church so I'll just have to rely on you to think up some four letter words. I'll start. Arch. Buck. Cool. Dear. Even. Alphabetical even. Dead easy. So here's a moment to think four letters for yourself... Strange minds you have.

I hope some of you will have come up with the word 'love'.

It's the only four-letter word you need to know. It comes in all shapes and sizes, happens to people of all ages from a baby to a nan, of all the animals in the world it's something only humans have.

Love. Love is all you need.

If you listen to religious people on the TV (and you probably don't because they're usually really boring) you might think Christianity was all about saying no or sinning (or rather not sinning) or fighting each other. It isn't. Being a Christian is all about love. Because God is love.

That's what St John says:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God is love.

Wherever you see love, you see something that looks just like God. It might be all that hearts and flowers Valentine's day sort of stuff. That's love. It might be the sticking with a person for 10, 20 30 years despite their outrageous flaws which are

now obvious but were well hidden until you'd signed the registers. Long suffering love. It might be a grandchild listening politely to tales of what it was like when I was young. That's *really* suffering for love. It might be the parent dabbing Dettol onto your grazed knee- it stings but it's love. And it might be something that sounds like this: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*

That's your genuine St Paul, that is.

So. That word. The Word. Love.

The punch line.

L. O. V. E. God really is a four letter word.