

You just can't win. It doesn't matter what you do.

Some might say if you want it enough you can win it.
You won't.

How many times have you heard 'if you work hard enough, you'll get it.
You won't- someone else will.

If you practice hard enough you'll be good enough. No chance. It could be you- but it won't. All you have to do is dream- and then you'll wake up. You just can't win. If life's a game of winners and losers, well, let's just say you're not bringing home the silverware. True, you're going to be spared having to spend any more time being in the same room as Alan Sugar. But then that's small compensation for your destiny as the first one testing out their new patent leather shoes on the walk of shame. You just can't win.

That's life. It's nice sometimes, keeps you sane, to imagine that you're just one last push away from the podium, that one day your brow will be crowned with laurels rather than frowns; but truth is, you just can't win.

And as you wander through the match of life, there are always those on the pitch with you more than happy to make it quite clear that winning is going to be the one item on your bucket list you're never going to reach.

Any interaction with the Home Office. You just can't win.

The park patrol that dish out fines for for minuscule infringements of parking and littering laws. Just can't win.

The people who design 'press one for more frustration; press two to lose an extra half hour of your life; press three to be instantly cut off and have to start again' automated phone systems. You just can't win.

With some people there's no winning and though I'm taking my life into my hands saying it, the ones we are most likely to meet- and encounter earlier- in our lives are... teachers. I'm in a direct sight line of at least two, three right now, so let me say. Wonderful people, salt of the earth, essential workers, wouldn't be where I am today if not, etc. etc. But in that match of you vs teacher: you're gonna lose every time. It's

the way it has to be, but still. With apologies to our current and retired pedagogues, let me demonstrate:

Would you do that at home?

No.

Then don't do it here.

Would you do that at home?

Yes.

Well don't do it here.

You can't win.

And then, when you give as your excuse that you were simply following the example set by your classmate you will of course be asked something along the lines of 'well if [insert name] jumped off a cliff would you? No. Yes. I don't know Miss, what would you do? Ow.

Now, 'would you jump off a cliff?' is a smart trick question, but it's actually a hard lesson, perhaps the most difficult lesson teacher is called on to teach because it runs quite contrary to our nature. Not lemming-like leaping off cliffs, but imitation. It's how we stop being a bawling baby bundle and move on to the next stage and the next and the next; by imitating others. It's the quickest and easiest way for us to learn; forget the manual, watch someone else doing it, monkey see, monkey do all the way. What the jumping off the cliff lesson is trying to teach is, yes imitation is how we learn, all well and good, but you really need to learn how to distinguish a good example to copy from a bad example to shun, lest you find yourself like Wiley Coyote legs furiously running on the road that is now thin air, having followed our hero off the edge of a cliff.

What's all this got to do with the feast of All Saints were celebrating today I hear you say? Let me explain...

The official Anglican position on saints is, like official Anglican positions on almost anything theological, difficult to pin down, and, sort of fudged, and a bit vague, with a foot in both camps and a rear end firmly on the fence. So although we still keep a pretty full calendar of saints days— including today— article 22 of those 39 Articles that are supposed to be a sort of summary of what we believe says that:

“Invocation of Saints, [alongside some other ‘Romish practices’] is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.”

So no invoking, but piecing together a bit from the Prayer Book, a bit from the catechism, a bit from the Homilies and so on, the official Anglican position is something like ‘the saints are examples for us to imitate of good Christian lives, people to follow in the footsteps of (even if they lead us off a cliff, which of course they never would). Saints are ‘heroes of the faith’ if you like, something akin to the Green Cross Man but less disturbing to children. Hence the appearance some time in the 1980s of a Church of England calendar of saints days featuring such unlikely luminaries as Florence Nightingale, Mary Sumner, John Calvin, George Fox, Christina Rossetti and that 18th century boy band The Wesley Brothers; good sticks no doubt, but chosen for the good example they gave rather than anything more miraculous or supernatural. Now whatever your view on this– and we wouldn’t be Anglicans if we didn’t in a single congregation have an example of every single possible view on a matter of religion and some impossible ones too– whatever your view on this theologically, I think in practical terms, ‘saints are good examples to follow’ is really unhelpful.

Firstly, nobody likes a show off, and although I’m sure all of the people we name as saints were exemplars of modesty, there’s still that vicarious whiff off goody two shoes when teacher points out how wonderful that person is and we should try to be more like them. Not designed to increase our natural feeling of affinity, or likelihood to imitate.

More importantly, I think, there’s something amazingly deflating about seeing perfect people living the perfect life lived to perfection. It might make you feel aspirational to see all that perfection, but then when, inevitably you fail (remember the beginning of this sermon- you just can’t win) you end up disheartened and even less well motivated than you were to start with. It’s a much observed phenomenon: it’s a rare person that posts a photo of reality on Facebook or Instagram, and all that unreal perfection is just making everybody feel lousy and inadequate.

So, I think I want to put a stop to this right now and say, all the saints were sinners. Except those angels we, somewhat confusingly also number as saints, and don’t try to imitate them, because they could fly away if they jumped off a cliff and you can’t. So, I’ll say it again, all the saints (except the angels) were sinners. They did all the

good, holy stuff we remember them for. *And* all the bad, embarrassing, sinful stuff we do, but never put on Instagram / want in the newspapers / tell the bishop about [delete as applicable].

When we hold the saints up as 'examples to imitate' it does sort of suggest that sainthood is something that we do, rather than the actual case, which is that sainthood is something God does to us. Holiness is not something that the saints achieved for themselves: it was God shining through them, in all their glorious don't tell the Bishop variety, imperfection and sinfulness.

We cannot imitate the saints, but God can shine through us. And he will. He is already.

Nobody likes a show off, blessed are the meek. God loves us because of our imperfections. God reaches out to us not because we are saintly, but because we are not saintly. Those who are well have no need of a physician; those who are perfect have no need of God.

You just can't win. But as far as God is concerned, you already have. He's the ref after all. You've already won. You just didn't realise what the game was.