

There are times in life when you have no choice but to do a 180 degree turn. You may have spent years folding your arms and putting down your foot, defending your position, drawing uncrossable lines in the sand and then without warning your stance becomes, actually...

In the face of insurmountable evidence, or an overwhelming experience you have to rapidly reevaluate a previously tenaciously held position and face the fact that the only way to retain integrity and save face is a *volte face*. If you're a politician, this is unfortunate, as you will be forever branded with the disgrace of having done a 'u-turn' and although rationality may have won a small victory, and you will have all but unknowingly recovered your humanity, you will have been measured against Margaret Thatcher and found wanting. Your political career will be over. But you might have saved your soul.

We cling to positions without thinking, because we always have and that's what we've thought since we were this high; or we trust the party so much we never scruple to question the party line. More often than not, we cling to a position because we lack the will or the imagination to place ourselves in another person's shoes, and it is only when we have found ourselves forced to walk a while in those someone else's slingbacks, that we can suddenly see that the other side has a much better point after all.

Up until fourteen years ago, I had not been, it would be fair to say, a great fan of children in churches, and for many years would have been counted firmly among those who thought Victorian values started at the church gate, at least as far as children, who should be seen and not heard, were concerned. I knew that God has not designed a baby's cries to be easily ignored: that would be defeating the point. However, we are not wild beasts, slaves to our instincts, unable to control our nature. It could have been a baby complaining it was hungry, a toddler delighted by the opportunity a long aisle afforded to play that favourite game of run-from-Mum, or a member of the Sunday School restless during the drone of the sermon. Any childish breach of the peace was the reason to bring out the turned head and the silent but deadly glare that flung the accusation 'Can't you control that child?'

Partly, not having children myself I had not been inoculated against their chaotic noisy presence by the 24/7 exposure that is parenting. And in the congregation of St Mary, Stoke Newington, it didn't help that the woman whose pew I had mistakenly sat in decided she would punish my temerity by sitting behind me and feeding her toddler Monster Munch through the Mass. Moving to another seat didn't stop the sentence: it took moving to another church. Any way, whatever the reason, if children were to come to church, I thought, they should not disturb me: if they did, I reasoned, this could only be a sign of neglectful parenting.

It took a while for me to be forced into a u-turn on that one, but I have to thank for that a young man named Isaac Summers, who was the princely age of two when he was the cause of my epiphany.

Isaac, his sister, his parents and I had travelled up to Oxford for the open day of my former theological college. Isaac's dad was then contemplating putting himself forward for the priesthood so I invited him along: he's now Area Dean of Waltham Forest. Anyway, part of the open day was Mass at noon, and no sooner had we got into the church than the question came: 'Can you look after Isaac and his sister for us during Mass?' 'Of course' I said, trudging off to what successive generations of students had christened the zoo: the children's area of the college church. What could be easier than sitting at the back with a couple of kids?

Well Miriam, despite having been known to ask pointed questions of the priest in the middle of mass in her home church, busied herself with some drawing for the duration. Isaac however, had other ideas. First, was to extract the maximum amount of noise possible from every toy in children's corner. When the charms of that ran out, he elected to crawl amazingly rapidly out of children's corner, round the church screaming happily at the top of his voice. Followed by me. 'Run-from-substitute-mum' is, of course, a good game, so it had to be repeated again and again. Only when I had returned Isaac to the chimp's enclosure for the third time did I notice that many of those attending mass were not rapt in prayer. Instead, they were busy glaring at me. And if looks could kill...

In one giddy rush of enlightenment I understood, from the inside, every pained parent-in-church look I had ever seen, the embarrassment, the horror, the sinking feeling: the cold sickening fear that taking a child to church can give. Sometimes you have to walk a mile in someone else's shoes, or at least sit 30 mins with their toddler, before you understand. Thank you, that boy.

*[Jesus] then took a little child, set him in front of them, put his arms round him, and said to them, 'Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me;'*

Even though there are worse things in life than not hearing the sermon: probably most things in fact, I'm not suggesting that we should simply let children run riot in the name of Jesus. Perhaps though, we need to be more careful about not letting the older people run riot in the name of Jesus: because we do that every week, just in a quieter and much less energetic way.

No, when Jesus talks about children, he's not just talking about those of a certain chronological age: he's talking about us all. The disciples were arguing about which of them is the greatest. Who's the best? And Jesus answer is, 'All of you'. It always will be that way. In first century Palestine a child was at best another pair of hands to help in the field, at worst another mouth to feed: it had no rights, no status, the lowliest of the low. And that's why Jesus picked one up and held them in front of the

disciples and said 'be like this'. From the holiest saint to the grossest sinner, from the most powerful in society to the wholly powerless: all are equal in God's eyes. There is one King, and then everybody else.

Anyone can come to Jesus, but the only reason any of us comes to Jesus, is that Jesus has called us. Today, very excitingly for us here, he's called Charlie. We have not chosen to come. We are not born into the rôle. No entry without an invite. We cannot come without being called, and Jesus has called us, each and every one. We cannot, we must not question the call for others, though that is what we come close to doing if we look askance at those who find the prospect of running up and down this building thrilling.

I think you're wonderful. I do. But admit it. We are all, at times, insufferable. We all have toe-curling, teeth on edge habits, and sometimes we even bring them to church and air them in public. Me particularly. But, you know, Jesus calls us just the same.

If we want to follow Jesus, then we must bear with each other's frailties; learn to live with our differences; it's not that hard if we remember that none of us is greater in his eyes, none of us has a monopoly on his love.

In his one Biblical letter St James warns his people not to fawn over the rich in their congregation and push the poor aside. All are equal in God's sight. Rich, poor. Young, old, somewhere in the middle. Male, female, somewhere in the middle. Married, civil partnered, divorced, widowed, single, gay, straight, somewhere in the middle. Good parents, not so good parents, somewhere in the middle. Settled, transient, migrant, refugee. Able bodied, disabled. Einstein or Essex... on and on all the infinite ways there are to divide the human cake. All God's children.

*'Anyone who welcomes one of these little children in my name, welcomes me;'*

There is one God: all of us are his children. There is one king and one people: all of us are equal. He is King not by accident of birth but by virtue of being the very creator of his kingdom.