

Here's a question for you: What is the most annoying sound in the world?

Fingernails scratching down a wet window pane? A new stick of chalk scraping across a blackboard? Two metal spoons grating together?

Perhaps it is the sound of a person struggling to open a bag of potato crisps, then eating them all. With their mouth open. Before licking their fingers and lips. Then noisily drinking a fizzy drink through a straw, paying 10 minutes -minimum- of particular attention to extracting that last teaspoonful at the bottom. And all rounded off with a noisy, noisome satisfied belch? Annoying indeed, but come to think about it, that's half a dozen sounds- more if you count each crisp individually- so it might not count. A bit like saying 'the Conservative party' is the most annoying person in the world, when we all know that the earth's most irritating person is... an individual.

What sound is it that really irritates, that sets your teeth on edge and your nerves to fight or flight?

The shriek of the vacuum cleaner coming ever closer to your place of repose? The screams of a tantrum in the supermarket queue? Ten minutes- just 10- listening to someone else's banal mobile phone conversation? Someone learning to play the violin? The twenty-fourth time you hear 'Your call is important to us; you are moving forward in the queue'? Listening to hour after hour of a professional singer's warm-up exercises is not much fun- believe me I used to live next to an opera singer. The ticking of two out of sync clocks? The insistent ring of the phone in another room? The muffled thumping of a summer sound system in Beddington Park?

It looks like there's so much competition for the illustrious title, that it might be impossible to choose the most irritating noise there can be, but actually there's no real competition at all. The world's most annoying sound is this:

It's small, it lasts only a fraction of a second, but it's deadly. The tut compresses the maximum amount of annoyance potential into the minimum amount of time and effort- you don't even have to take a deep breath to create one.

I don't know what it is that has brought most of us, here today, to Jesus, but I'm absolutely certain it wasn't a tut.

Perhaps we are the lucky ones. Because for most people, Christianity is the religion of the pursed lips, wagging finger, aggressively folded arms and the tut. Do you think Supernanny invented the naughty stair? Nah. It was Christians: for centuries certain Protestant churches were built with benches at the back reserved for notorious sinners, the tut made manifest in mahogany. Most of the arguments at General Synod boil down to Puritans still trying to make somebody (else) sit in that seat. For so many people, if they think about church at all, church is a place not where you come to receive God's unconditional forgiveness, but where you come to be told how bad you are.

Forget what we might hear that fills our hearts with yearning for God, that sets our spirit racing: the sound of Palestrina's polyphony, Stanford's canticles, Cranmer's English, crisp carols on a Xmas morning, worship songs at Greenbelt. The dominant sound of Christianity, what will reverberate across the empty desolation when St Paul's is nothing but rubble, St Peter's has crumbled to the ground, the sky has been rolled up like a scroll and the final trumpet blown; the last sound echoing away into eternity, the last testament to Christianity will be a tut.

Right now though there might be another sound in your head. A sort of insistent voice demanding attention. Saying something like: hey! hold on, I've read the Bible: surely the 'tut' gets the thumbs up from the big guy?

The Old Testament? Basically a list of things God wants you to tut about baked on to an extended description of the people you should tut at.

Even Jesus said:

*'If your brother does something wrong, go and have it out with him alone, between your two selves... If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you. But if he refuses to listen to these, report it to the community; and if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a pagan or a tax collector.'*

But. But, there's a fine line between a concerned quiet word and throwing the first stone. A 'tut' is not a warning; it is a judgement: in one tiny sound the verdict has been declared and that verdict is always the same: guilty. Which is precisely the opposite of what Jesus is asking us to do.

Who did Jesus condemn? He refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery; or the sinful woman who wasted the costly ointment on his feet; or the loathsome tax collector who so desperately wanted to see him he climbed up a tree. His condemnation was reserved for a rather different lot: for the rich young man who kept all the rules, for the smug and selfish self-satisfied and especially, especially for the religious experts, for those who drew up the burdens of guilt for other people's backs, those who prayed loudly in the Temple how glad they were that they were not sinners, those who complained when Jesus was healing without their permission, those who trumpeted their

piety on the street corners, the makers of naughty stairs and sinners benches, those who, without a doubt, knew how to tut.

*"if he refuses to listen to the community, treat him like a pagan or a tax collector."*

Tax collectors...? Weren't they the people Jesus always seems to be having dinner with? The one's he called at their tax booths to be his disciples? Like St Matthew. You can just imagine the response when *that* disciple is asked what he does for a living. Jesus, in the words of his enemies : '*a friend of tax collectors and sinners.*' And pagans...? Why don't we turn to the words of the man who gave most of his life to trying to bring the pagans to Christ: St Paul. St Paul gets a bad press nowadays largely because some of his writings are used as an excuse for people to indulge their sexism and homophobia. Be really maybe he was more a touchy feely huggy nice guy.

*All the commandments.. are summed up in this single command:You must love your neighbour as yourself. Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour; that is why it is the answer to every one of the commandments*

*"treat him like a pagan or a tax collector."*

Treat them less like the trash and more like the lost sheep, that extraordinarily precious thing that is each human soul, that thing that our Good Shepherd drops everything to find. The further away a person seems to be from God, the more ardently we should be trying to love them.

There is *nothing* no matter how terrible or how trivial, how much or how little it matters to us, there is nothing that you, me or

anyone else can do, think, say that will stop God loving us, nothing we can do that will pitch us onto God's naughty stair. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise.

Not that we can do anything we want because nothing will land us in the wrong. Not that we can't do anything wrong. Not that we won't do anything wrong. But when we do go wrong, God will love us back into the right. God is a greengrocer: he deals in carrots not sticks.

When Jesus, fasting in the desert, is tempted by Satan he reaches for words from the book of Deuteronomy to help him resist.

'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.'

I absolutely guarantee you, the one word that will *never* be is tut.