

What is it about lamp posts eh? What is it about lamp posts, what is it about these items of everyday street furniture that is so important to dogs? We don't notice the structures unless they're malfunctioning or we're busy waving to our friend on the other side of the road and we walk straight into one, but, for a dog it's a whole different universe out there and the lamp post is the centre of it. A Martian who had come to Earth might well look at the teeming fauna of earth and decide that the life form that has so modified the world that other creatures willingly provide all their needs so they can spend 95 per cent of their time sleeping must be the most intelligent one and therefore the our extraterrestrials need to make first contact with dogs. Those misguided aliens would observe this dominant species and their relationship with lamp posts and be awestruck. Such devotion! Is their attachment to the structures perhaps a form of worship of the god of light? Is *canis lupus familiaris* a purely rational creature that esteems the austere functionality of street illumination? Is it some imprinting pattern formed shortly after birth? What is it about lamp posts? Just before the Martian leaps in and says 'We come in peace, lovely lamp post, all hail the gods of light, what's with chasing squirrels then?' they might just stop and ponder: just what is it about lampposts. Are they really significant to this creature, or are they just a convenience, in the right place at the right time? If the Martian's antennae had been working properly it might have thought to ask the dog's pet- the one on the end of the lead- what was going on, in which case they would have got the response, 'no, lampposts are not significant, they're just there'. They're something for the dog to p...pause and leave their scent on and your 'intelligent life forms' consider this lingering odour to communicate vital information. But it doesn't need to be a lamppost: anything will do: a tree, a plant that's slightly bigger than other ones around, the corner of a churchyard wall (every morning, thank you Xin), a Victorian gravestone, even a clump of grass cuttings that wasn't there yesterday. The point is, these are all merely things that stick out, and so they provide the most obvious things to use for dogs to communicate with each other. Lamp posts, walls, clumps of clippings, however, have no relevance in themselves.

Now I know it's a big leap from a dog's post-it note to religion, but you know I'm going to try to bridge that gap. Religion is I hope why we're all here this morning, you're certainly not sheltering from the cold. So though it's a bold stride from one to the other I insist there is a parallel to be drawn, because humans (the only creatures we know of that do religion) do exactly the same lamp post thing as dogs. The same sort of thing. Not exactly the same thing with lamp posts because that would get you arrested, but the same sort of instinctively picking something that's sticking up or sticking out as the best place to leave a message you want other people to get.

You pin your 'lost cat' notice to a prominent tree, put your advert for personal services in a popular phone box, park your 'one careful owner car for sale' at the front of your drive, you put the products with the biggest mark up on the eye-level shelf, you put things where you look because that's where the people you want to see your message are going to look too. Those lampposts can be very advanced- books, television, computers, internet- but basically it's all just a very fancy lamp post. Lamp posts will be used for any sort of human communication, any message we want to get across, including religion. In the beginning was the Word, and what religion is is us conveying the message that Word speaks. There's a message to get across, and we will use the same ways everyone else will, we'll head for the nearest lamp post with our good news.

Faith, however, adds an element of danger to the humdrum activity of pin-it-where-people-will-see-it because faith has the tendency to spill its meaning out all over everything it touches. Faith can give an ersatz sense of the sanctified to the least likely of things- clergy for example. Faith can leak the aura of holiness onto whatever is around at the time regardless of its actual merits, even a pile of old stones, wood and a bit of Victorian slap can become that rather special place that speaks of heaven that is a parish church. This is not just a lamp post. It's holy. So strong is this effect that all religious people are- or should be- engaged in a constant battle not to end up worshipping the lamp post.

Principle lamp post for Christians is the Bible. It's where we go first if we want to know what we want to know about our faith, it's the main concentration of tales of what happens when people meet God. Not only is the good book is a lamppost, what's written in there is very often a record of what were the favoured lamp posts for the people who wrote it, the ways in their times and places in which faith was best communicated. Scripture is a record of what brought people closer to God at a particular time and a particular place. But here's the vital thing to remember: the time and the place changed, and so did the lamp post.

Head to the Old Testament and you'll see that for a long time the people of God had a code of living: not eating certain foods, behaving in a certain way, wearing certain things, doing and not doing certain things at certain times. This was what made God's people distinctive and through distinctiveness they were brought closer to God. Not tucking in to gammon with pineapple when all your mates were; never letting a cockle or a mussel pass your lips- these were things that would bring you closer to God. These were the ways you communicated your faith, these were your lamp

posts. And then. And then there came a time and a place when the exact opposite was true. There came a time when all that particular distinctiveness was no longer the way. We see that transformation today, or rather we witness the realisation that the transformation has occurred, in the reading from Acts.

Once, not eating unclean animals brought you closer to God: now the opposite is true: now your lack of dietary restriction is what marks you out and brings you closer to God!

Peter had a vision on the roof: a great sheet descending from heaven with all sorts of animals on it. God tells him to get the barbecue going and Peter demurs. 'You know I can't eat that God, it's unclean.' 'Not any more it isn't' is God's response.

Now if this was *just* about food then that wouldn't really be that big a deal. Dietary restrictions can be a bit of a fiddle, but I can personally attest it's not a great strain to go through life never eating a bacon sandwich. It really isn't. But this *isn't* just about food. It isn't really about food at all.

At the end of his vision Peter is told in no uncertain terms:
'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

And then the Spirit tells the Apostle:

Not to make a distinction between them and us.

And just a bit later on in the same chapter of Acts Peter says

God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean

So, this whole vision is not about Peter being given permission to tuck into a prawn sandwich. It's not about food, it's about people.

Being labelled 'unclean' as a potential foodstuff is probably not a bad thing: it means you won't get eaten. Being labelled an unclean person is rather different prospect. Being labelled an unclean person means that at the very best you get a lot less in life than what everybody else gets and at at worst your experience of life is nasty, short and brutal.

Foreigners. Sexual minorities. Women, most of the time. Sick and disabled people. Sinners. All were unclean.

But not any more.

Peter was a bit slow getting up to speed: he really shouldn't have needed the sheet vision to get with the programme. He'd been there for years watching Jesus making pariahs respectable- the woman at the well, tax collectors, sex workers, roman soldiers- and making them respectable not by changing them, but by changing the definition of what is respectable, changing the definition of what is respectable by ignoring the very notion: refusing to acknowledge the rules of clean and unclean. God cannot be made unholy through contact with us: we can be made holy through contact with him. And Jesus surrounded himself with all those people everybody else thought were unclean. They didn't change, but he made them clean.

'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.'

Do not make a distinction between them and us.

Here is where we Christians need to be careful. Because we've still got the old lamp post, still bearing it's ancient messages, we still know all the old ways there were of getting us closer God. There's a lot of them in the Bible. We should treasure them, but always remember that they're they to demonstrate to us that the whole point of our faith is to bring us closer to God. That was how they did it then *but* that's not necessarily how we should do it now. How we should do it will be different. There is no clearer demonstration of this than Peter's vision described in Acts. Unclean to clean is a 180 degrees a complete U- turn. You don't get more different than that.

Nothing is carved in stone except that we must come closer to God. Everything else is the lamp post. Coming closer to God was the purpose of the law and the prophets. Jesus did not come to abolish that, but to show us a way to come us even closer.