

From Winston Churchill to William Harvey, Gregor Mendel to Brian Epstein through history there has been a select group of individuals who shared the immense satisfaction of knowing that, after years of being thought to be one penny down on one sandwich short of a picnic, looked at askance, laughed at, ostracised, marginalised and patronised: after ad nauseam being told they were hopelessly wrong: after all that, they were actually right all along. This I have to say is not something I have much experience of: not because I'm always right anyway but because if people think I'm wrong then inevitably, I am. Naturally, as a Christian I have pretty much bet the farm on Pascal's wager in the hope that I'll be proved right right at the end. But, if press reports last week are to be believed, my chance finally to say 'I told you so' may come even sooner than expected, at the very least, before the last judgment. Last week in fact.

After years of my maintaining that a finger-foxing fugue will suddenly become playable if practice is peppered with profanities; that a recalcitrant bottle top will playfully pop off if first subjected to some weapons grade cursing or that a grinding and spluttering car will smoothly start if sworn at, it seems that science has finally proven me right. Not that the boffins knew it was my theory they were testing, but, you know, I can live without the acknowledgment if I can be smug about being right. Yes, scientists at Keele University have shown that swearing can indeed boost your strength and stamina. No need for the spinach Popeye, just tell Brutus what you really think of him. Isn't that amazing? And intriguingly they're not sure why swearing at the jam jar will make the lid easier to get off. They had thought there must be some physiological mechanisms behind this- sympathetic NS muscle boost thanks to endorphins or epinephrine or some such- but apparently no such mechanism has been found. So if not physiology, it must be magic! Yes, it seems that the magic word is not 'shazam' or 'abracadabra' or even please but f...our letters long. Thus confirming the suspicion that first came to the fore of your mind about age 12, that all the things they don't want you to do are, in fact, well worth doing. And now, it seems they are good for you too. Within limits, of course. And not in church, please.

You may be disappointed to learn that despite the scientifically verified benefits of profaning I am not about to demonstrate the newly proven ability to effortlessly swearily open stuck jars.. from the pulpit and will continue of course, to maintain the pretence of squeaky cleanness common to all churchgoers. Certain exclusions apply: should Justin Welby make a sudden dramatic entrance into the eucharist / evensong I couldn't guarantee my language; same for Theresa May, though as in many quarters her name is a swear word I've already broken that promise anyway. My apologies.

Let's not go there. So, despite the benefits attested by science, I will continue from the pulpit that common Christian conspiracy while in church, of pretending that none of us know any swear words, and those that we do know- of course we don't know any, but if we did- those that we do know we never, ever speak. Thus perpetuating that even more common Christian tradition known to the world as 'hypocrisy'. Despite being given a run for it's money of late by 'bigot' 'hypocrite' is still the most common insult thrown at churchgoers. It's not a good thing, but we have to admit the truth that when it comes to it, none of us want to be, and all of us are. Mea culpa.

Now I should just stress that I do not think that Christians are any more likely to be hypocrites than anyone else; or are bigger hypocrites if they are, but we do set ourselves up for the accusation when, every time we get together we *don't* do things that we might otherwise normally do. At best church seems to be a sort of finishing school, a place where you aspire to be something you are not elsewhere; a place where people pretend that they don't swear, never covet their neighbour's ass and don't commit adultery in their heart. Which might not necessarily be a bad thing- at least some of the time we're on our best behaviour and that's better than none of the time. But as Christians, I think we should be very wary about giving the impression- both to others and to ourselves, that following Jesus is first and foremost about what you don't do. What would Jesus do? Well he certainly wouldn't do that!

Following Jesus- being his disciples, being a Christian requires, indeed demands of us that we change. This is without a doubt, 100 per cent- and radical change to boot, rather more sweeping than not swearing in church. Repent after all means turning, not saying sorry. Following Jesus is about what you will become rather than what you were, which is very often a relief if you've lived the sort of life many of us have. It demands of us that we change. But that change is not first and foremost about things you are going to give up, things you are not going to do, or things you are going to pretend you don't think / want / do. Christian change will be about things you *are* going to do.

Here's the crux. I know I could have saved you some time and just headed straight here, but you might have felt a touch cheated, so here, finally is the crux. There is a strong belief that one can grasp the requirements of the Christian faith by considering a number of ethical dilemmas- should there be assisted dying say, or should certain people be denied the opportunity to marry, perhaps- and then asking

the question: what is the Christian response to this dilemma? It's a common way to consider issues of morality. There is much to be learned from this approach, and it's all well and good as far as it goes, but the problem is, it doesn't really go very far. At best what you will end up with is a crib sheet of Christian things to do in certain situations, a list of what's right and what's wrong. Which might sound fair enough to you, but I say that's setting your sights low, damning yourself with faint expectations, cozying up to the Pharisees rather than exceeding their righteousness.

The point I'm trying to make is one that can sound more complicated than it really is: it's really the one about rules and regulations versus love. We don't really come closer to Jesus by stopping ourselves doing something when we want to do it. We come closer to Jesus by becoming more the sort of person he is. It's not about trying not to be a bad person: it's about becoming a good person. Those two are very different things.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Change the gender as relevant to your orientation and you will see the hopelessness of approaching the desired outcome of that teaching by trying to stop yourself doing something. Those sorts of undesirable thoughts, desires, ways of looking at other people will keep coming thick and fast if we simply try to stop them when they arise. And if we're trying to banish them, we've had them, which is pretty much shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. The only way we *are* going to be able to respond to that type of Jesus' teaching is to try to become more the person he is; not worrying about the person we don't want to be, but concentrating on the person we *do* want to be; not obsessing about stopping doing this or not doing that but striving instead for the greatest gift, the gift of love.

Even though I'm still not going to do it right now, unless you're really struggling to get that bottle top off, swearing, in the greater scheme of this, is really an irrelevance. We won't become more like Jesus by not swearing in church. Or by any 'not' doing.

But. The more we are able to love, to be infused by and with love, the more we are able to see our brothers and sisters in the light of love, the more like Jesus we will become.

