

Fr Andrew Fenby

What did I do? Where did we go wrong? It's a question you'll find many previously unsuspecting parents asking when their offspring hit their teenage years. I doubt it was just a quirk of my mother to think that way. How many previously proud progenitors have gazed on their offspring and thought: how on earth did I produce that? *Did I produce that? Was there a mix up at the hospital? Did the fairies spirit away my little princess and leave me with a changeling that only showed its true cuckoo feathers all these years later? Am I just imagining faces in the wood-chip, making up pictures in the flickering flames, seeing a family resemblance that isn't really there? It certainly seems more plausible each extra year past age 10. I think I was involved with raising that one, but how did I go so badly wrong as to end up with that? Sound familiar? Maybe it was just a localised phenomenon to my childhood home.*

In the interests of balance let me say it's not all one sided: children eagerly latch on to tales of the fostered pauper who turns out to be a prince; teenagers frequently look at their families, grimace and think: *I must have been switched at birth.*

Assuming you haven't been swapped in the maternity ward, replaced by a replica robot or cloned by aliens, there is a question here to be answered, and that question is: What is it that has made you, you rather than somebody else. Were you born this way (I know I was) or have you been brought up to be this? Can you override your genes or withstand your upbringing? Can you resist the logic of heredity or the magnetic pull of culture? The question, in a nutshell, is it nature or nurture? And the answer... yes and no, a bit of this, a bit of that. Maybe. Depends. Or maybe not.

Leopold Mozart, famous violin teacher and pretty successful composer had a son whom he christened Johann Chrysostom Wolfgang Amadeus. With his father's genes and his musical upbringing Wolfie went on to become arguably the greatest of all composers, his works famous throughout the world, many having been never out of performance, regulars in the repertory since the end of the 18th century. Nature or nurture? Strong evidence for either, or both. Though he died in his thirties, Wolfgang A. Mozart left two sons, the eldest of whom also became a composer. And with *his* father's genius genes and the most brilliant musical upbringing his father's reputation could obtain Franz Xavier Mozart... went on to produce a corpus of work characterised by its utter mediocrity, forgotten by all, only played today as a curiosity for desperate Mozartmaniacs. What happened? What did his parents do? With such illustrious genes and the best of all teaching, where did they go wrong?

In general, it has to be admitted, difficult though it might be to admit it, that the influence of parents on the way their children turn out is much less, much, much less than we'd like to think. Parents give children their genes and one or two other biological bits, but after that, it's out of their hands. Peers are more important influences on character development but ultimately a creation as complex and wonderful as a human being fully alive (which you may not recognise as an accurate description of your teenager, but it is) comes about in a wondrously complex way and more importantly, interactively. Children are not empty vessels that we fill up with first our genes and then our teaching. From the womb, they interact with the outside world, they have not just a stake in their development, but a vital part to play.

For parents this will be bittersweet to contemplate. It means that when they get ordained later in life and become Rector of a fabulous ancient parish church in south London, it's not your fault. And when they turn out to be LGBT you can't take the credit. Swings and roundabouts. You give them your genes, you care and nurture, you do your best, but it's largely out of your hands.

As any half-baked religious person will tell you if you give them the time and don't run away first, there are always three people involved in every human conception: it's amazing more people don't notice. There's you. There's your partner. And there's God. It is the Holy Spirit which is the spark of life, without which there would be no 'you' just a bundle of unpleasant inanimate goo. It takes three to make a baby. And then the development of each human life is the result of three agents: child, parents and all other people, and God. And each human personality is a stunning combination of biology (thank you parents), psychology (thank you upbringing) and theology (thank you God); a psychosomatic whole of body, mind and soul; nature, nurture and spirit. See what a complex, intriguing, endlessly interesting proposition you are.

And here's the really interesting part. Some things are irresistible but most of what makes you 'you' is not in the initial spec, most of what makes you 'you' is not set in stone. The building blocks - genes, upbringing and so on- are foundations but whether what is built on top will be a suburban semi, a Gothic cathedral or a garden shed is not pre-determined. Nature isn't everything, neither is nurture: both can in part and sometimes, be avoided, amended, circumvented or ignored. What's written in your DNA may stay unread. What you're taught and what you experience may go straight over your head. And, although God's fingerprints are all over your life; although God is closer to you than the air filling your lungs each time you breathe;

even though God calls each and every one of us by name; we don't have to listen. Even though God's blueprint is stamped on our souls, we will never be forced to follow the manual. Yes, he's all powerful: but God's call is not irresistible. If it was, there would be no non-believers and we would all be marionettes. But God doesn't want to watch a puppet show. So when he calls, you can walk away. No strings attached.

There were people Jesus called, who didn't drop everything and follow him. Not everyone left what they were doing— their nets, their father's boats, their tax booths— and followed him. For every Paul and Isaiah, for every Peter and Andrew, James and John there were myriad others who heard the excitement of the crowd and carried on with what they were doing. There were unknown numbers who saw him work his miracles, shrugged and went back to their day job. There were the religious leaders who knew something was afoot but couldn't believe their eyes and so turned away. There was the rich young man with so many questions and so many possessions, who Jesus looked directly in the eye and said 'Follow me.'

He didn't.

Like your genes, like your environment, like the culture you inhabit, the Christ potential is always a part of you. The question is, do you realise the promise within? Or do you live your life treating your latent holiness like dead weight you just can't shake, dormant, switched off and slumbering? You have the choice, you *can* live your life like that.

If you're waiting to be knocked off your horse on the road to Damascus; if you're waiting for angel trumpets to rend the skies; if you're waiting for any of the spectacular big production numbers before you answer, you might never stop waiting. If you're thinking that you could never ignore God's call, if you're thinking you would never turn your back and walk away, if you're thinking you wouldn't be that stupid, if you're thinking, when he wants me, he'll let me know in a way I can't ignore: think again.

There are big things in your life— past, present and future— that you can't ignore, couldn't if you wanted to: the tectonic plates of biology, psychology and theology grinding together. But the vast bulk of what comprises our life is less obvious: a million chance occurrences here, a million and one small decisions there, transformation flitting into our world as nudges, suggestions, gentle hints and subtle

changes. You have choices. You have decisions to make. You have agency. You can't change everything, but you can change some things. Your life is not a bullet fired from a gun which no-one, least of all you, can stop.

There are many agents responsible for the development of a human life. The individual themselves; the parents, family, friends and neighbours, teachers and colleagues, lovers and enemies. But there is only one who will never, ever say 'Where did I go wrong? God.

Jesus has been calling you from the moment the spirit first sparked you into life. If you're not following him, it's not because *he* hasn't called, it's because *you* haven't listened; it's because you've heard and turned away. It's easy not to hear, it's easy to be distracted, it's easy to leave it for another day, it's easy to add it to the bottom of the to-do list. It's easy, and that's why we all do it.

Lucky for you, lucky for me, lucky for all of us, Jesus keeps calling. And he won't stop calling until at long last we put down our nets. And then finally, we will all follow him.