

We never really leave school. Even when we have exited the world of exercise books and exams the process continues as we are progressively schooled in the language of life. And that learning is, as it says on the tin, life-long. Even if it's just learning to cope with more than we ever imagined we could or degree-level instruction in the ageing process from inside-out personal experience, our education continues apace. And of course outside of the classroom, very often the subject that is most often on our curriculum is ourselves. There are, for example, a couple of things I have learned about myself in recent years. The first, is that I need time to think about something if I am to have a decent chance of making a good decision. If I have to make a snap decision it is usually not a good one. The second, is that I am not a very good Christian.

These two lessons I learned both in one go, the time the Parish of St Francis, Barkingside hired a skip. The skip was not *hired* as an educational tool: rather more prosaically it was there so that we could clear some of the Parish's accumulated detritus. And so come the day of reckoning, a few of us gathered to start the herculean tatt-trashing labour. Not long into our efforts we came to a mouth agog standstill as we watched a car pull up in the car park, its occupant get out, open her car boot and transfer its contents to our skip. The next thing that happened was that, almost without thinking, I went to the skip, picked up what had been put in there and returned it to its previous owner. It wasn't thrown at her, just politely given back. Needless to say, her response was anything but polite and measured, but did contain several variations on the theme of you don't expect that sort of behaviour from people who call themselves Christians. Ouch. Yes, much better it would have been to have just left the matter as it stood and fumed to ourselves, more Christian not to have fumed at all : no doubt had I spent more time thinking of a response that's what I would have done, but I didn't. That particular behaviour- alongside much else I hasten to add- makes me, not a very good Christian.

And also, a rather typical Christian, at least if research from the University of Nottingham is to be believed. After some typically sneaky social psychology experiments (are there any other kind?) a few years ago researchers discovered that 'Religion makes people nice to... religious people'. It seems that having a faith- be it Christian, Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist, does not make you any more cooperative or unselfish than anybody else, unless you are dealing with someone who shares your faith. So Hindus were unselfish with other Hindus but not with Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and people with no faith; Christians were only cooperative with Christians and so on. I am presuming though, the Christians from this study were not Anglicans,

who seem to find it next to impossible even to cooperate with each other, never mind anybody else.

As social psychology goes the experiment used to reach this conclusions was a fairly mild one, just having people cooperate on a task and modifying a few variables here and there. In the 60s and 70s the heroic age of psychological research, studies would often involve such wheezes as creating riots at Boy Scout camps, getting people to administer electric shocks to each other and setting up mock prisons in college basements that had to be quickly closed down when the 'officer' students started applying a little too much relish and imagination to their rôle as a punishers of the 'prisoner' students. Who were of course, in their turn, plotting an escape tunnel.

However exciting or not the study, results of research through all the decades from the 50s right up to the present day have nevertheless been pretty much the same; humans practice in-group favouritism. We give preferential treatment to people who are like us. What has been surprising is that it's taken so long for somebody to demonstrate that this is still the case for those whose religion teaches them otherwise: in group-favouritism still operates when those 'in-groups' are religious ones, even when the creeds of those religions say you shouldn't.

As it stands, only being nice to people who are like us is a searing source of shame to Christians- after all didn't Jesus tell us the precise opposite that we need to love our enemies:

*For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?*

You might be tempted to say, well, however shameful, for us, *mea culpa* and all that, there is no real harm done. At least we're doing good to *somebody*. But of course it never really ends there, it never ends with just being nice to somebody from your in-group. Because in order to have an in-group to be nice to, there has to be, by definition, an out-group. And although it is theoretically possible for us to be nice to an out-group, to see it as being 'different but equally valuable as us' or 'just as likely to be comprised of worthwhile people as we are' that just isn't what happens. Ever. Ask the Primates.

Wanting to belong is a deep-seated human need and one of the major struts of our social well-being and one step on, slinking along the bottom of that need is the reality that without a 'them' there is no 'us' for us to belong to. In order to increase the sense of 'us' we need to increase the sense of 'them' by exaggerating our differences and ignoring our similarities; by creating caricatures that merge into stereotypes that morph into lies. Witch-hunting and scapegoating, whipping boys and fall guys, PMQs to pantomime see it operating everywhere: nothing is easier or more effective for creating a shared group identity than creating an outsider. We get that nice fuzzy warm all-together feeling by pushing someone else out into the cold. It really is an essential piece of kit in the human toolbox; its effects are amazingly strong, we want to belong.

And yet the differences we use to build our belonging, what separates us, is pretty much nothing. Really, nothing. The results though, can be serious and we all know where this keeps ending up. Some people get inordinately het up about their nationality; which might mean pompous patriotism, and it might mean genocide. But what, when it comes down to it, is nationality? An arbitrary accident of geography. The thinnest layer of varnish on the top of our experience. It only matters because we make it matter; it only matters because it helps us to belong.

Some people get inordinately het up about religious difference. One word in the creed has kept East and Western Christianity apart for the best part of a millennium; human beings have been burned alive by other human beings in an argument over how to interpret a book; with wearying regularity Sunni bombs kill Shia; Shia bombs kill Sunni in an argument nobody who is not Sunni or Shia can understand. And come the day of judgement, the arguments which gave birth to sectarian atrocities will be entirely irrelevant. It only matters because we make it matter; it only matters because it helps us to belong.

Here's the really important bit: Jesus did not come in order to create another in-group. He is, sent

*to bring the good news to the poor,  
to proclaim liberty to captives  
and to the blind new sight,  
to set the downtrodden free*

His ministry, his passion, his crucifixion and resurrection was not in order to create a new religious elite. He is not proclaiming a new super-group; he is proclaiming the end to groups, the end of division, the end of inside and outside.

Jesus is the last outsider, and *the* ultimate victim of our in-grouping and scapegoating.  
*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him*

There He is, cast out, calling us all out. If we want to be his disciples we must forget the warmth of the herd, the shared heat of the holy huddle.

One man, taking all we can throw at him. And refusing to rise to the provocation. Taking all we can throw at him, and giving back love.

Any social psychologist will tell you that what they can show with experiments and research is general principles: generalities and tendencies not hard and fast rules. Psychology is much more about where your place is on a spectrum than whether you are either in or out. So we can take some comfort that there will always be those who wear Christ's Cross who *will* buck the trend and recognise Christ in all their brothers and sisters, not just the ones who are like them; who will not fall into the trap of only loving those who love us. There's no reason why those Christians cannot be us. We are not stuck in particular ways of behaviour, trapped like Pavlov's dogs by instincts we can never master. We know what the challenge is, we know who has asked us to rise to it, and yes, we can meet that challenge. Yes, we can.