

We learn by imitation. Not always. And not only. We can also do trial and error, reward and punishment and least likely of all hard study, of the books not Google it kind. If we try to learn from Google we rapidly end up down the rabbit hole of delusion as we learn that the world is in reality a small Hawaiian pizza run by a dynasty of alien lizards. We have big brains, and there are many ways to fill them, but first of all, we learn by imitation. Monkey see, monkey do is powerful. This is why I really have to take care what I say, especially around children. Because children love to imitate. I wasn't born with a dog collar round my neck. Far from it. Indeed I had just under 40 years of life before I turned into Dawn French, and in those four decades of life I learned lots of words- some long ones thanks to studying first psychology then theology, words so uninteresting that no child would ever remember them. And, more pertinently lots of short words. Being a lifelong student of the slings and arrows also gifted my vocabulary lots and lots of four letter words which, if uttered, would you believe it, go directly from a child's ears to its brains and then immediately and repeatedly back out of its mouth. Yes, these days by the age of seven there's nothing I could say that a child hasn't heard a hundred times in the playground already that week, and by the time they've got their treble choir surplice they could beat me in all rounds of a cussing content, but still. One makes a special effort to mind your language round those of more tended years. Elsewhere, forty years is a lot of habit to break and well into the teens of my ministry, in unguarded moments I've found myself called potty mouth. You know who you are. People in glass houses.

I am digressing. The point is, from the earliest of ages we learn by imitation. That's *how* we learn to speak, to communicate:, how we navigate the calms and rapids of our beautiful lives: we listen to what's being said and then we open our mouths and we too can tell other people where to get off, and that we love them, and that the toilets are at the back of the church on the left, and that we're bored now and that God sent his Son to save the world and all the infinity of other things that we've just got to tell somebody else. We learn by imitation.

If someone starts speaking fluently in a language you've not heard them speak before- and we're talking a real language here, not barking like a dog or nonsense glossolalia, let's say, Mandarin- wo ai xiongmao: ni ai bu ai xiongmao ma?' you would no doubt assume that, they're imitating something their husband has said, or they've been reading some books or engaged a private tutor who slapped them on the wrist with a ruler every time they got a word wrong. You'd know it wasn't Google translate they'd used because the few Mandarin speakers are looking confused rather than shocked. You'd presume some learning. Unless, of course, it was Pentecost AD33 and suddenly a whole crowd of people were talking fluently in languages they'd never previously been heard to utter, and then you'd know they haven't been to night school or hunched over the parchment doing declensions and burning the midnight oil; you'd know they'd not been doing any of the usual learning, you'd know they were...drunk. Across two thousand years of history, humans can be wearingly the same. But once you'd forced aside your preconceptions and realised it was only

nine in the morning and therefore they couldn't possibly be pie-eyed; you'd realise that the sudden ability to speak fluent pamphilio-Phrygian could only be the work of God. These languages were learnt by the Spirit.

We learn by imitation, by trial and error, reward and punishment, hard study. *And* by the Holy Spirit, the greatest teacher of all. Not, I must stress, because the Spirit teaches us showstopping acts of great power or majorly impressive feats of linguistic skill or any of the other magnificent miracles decribed in the Acts of the Apostles, but because the Spirit teaches us about God. It's the *only* way we learn about God. It doesn't stop us trying other ways, but we cannot learn faith by imitation; we cannot know God by book learning, even good-book learning; it is the deepest sighing of the Spirit in our hearts that tells us all that we can know of the love divine.

Sounds easy, but when we learn by the Spirit, we have to unlearn what the world has taught us first, so it's not always straightforward: imitation can get in the way, fear of punishment can get in the way, the rewards of the world can get in the way; a particular danger for Christians, book learning can get in the way. But we must heed the Spirit chalking on the blackboards of our hearts, because the Spirit is teaching us a completely new way of being, a new way of communicating, a new way of learning, a new world. The Spirit is gentle, patient, generous, peaceful; it does not overwhelm or dominate us: so we can always hear the other voices and the worldly cacophony can easily squirrel our attention away from the still small voice.

The Spirit is teaching us a completely new way of being, a new way of communicating, a new way of learning, a new world. A *shockingly* new world.

How so? A couple of examples.

When St Paul writes to the Christians in Rome and instructs them to '*be subject to the authorities*' this is not because, as many of us have been taught, those authorities are 'right' or 'ordained by God'; when Jesus says 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's' he is not tacitly acknowledging the Emperor's pretensions. Paul and Jesus say what they say because in the new world reality the authorities are unimportant, *irrelevant*: they are an obsolescent, hollow sham superseded by the kingdom of God. The old things are passing away, there is a new kid on the block, a yet more excellent way.

Or again, when Jesus tells those who will follow him to give away all their possessions, when the first disciples sold what they owned and held everything in common this was not because almsgiving is a good that praises God and glories the Son- which it certainly is and does-, but because in the new creation wealth and goods and riches are marks of the old world. What would previously be seen as a blessing is boon no longer, it it changed. The accretions make it impossible to squeeze through the eye of that needle into the new world. The old things are passing away, there is a yet more excellent way. And it is the Holy Spirit that guides us in that way.

For all this talk of newness, you may well note that the walls of Babylon still stand. You may see that Caesar still swaggers, drunk on his power in an ever more dissolute dance of depravity and cruelty.

It can take a long time to learn. And longer, even, to unlearn.

Still, the Spirit is teaching us a completely new way of being, a new way of communicating, a new way of learning, a new world.

A new world characterised not by greed or domination or cruelty or violence or misery or anxiety or envy. Instead, a world of joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity, and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. And love. Two millennia after the Pentecost descent on the disciples, the Holy Spirit continues to lavish her gifts on God's children; with infinite gentleness, with painstaking patience, she continues to teach us the language of love. Love that is beyond compare and yet can be imitated by all.

Love is the lesson. Love is the teacher. Love is the beginning and the end, love is all and in all.

To the Love Divine be praise and glory now and for ever...