

Lots of things are different these days. Pick a day, any day and you can always say, things are different these days. Look at our diet. Time was when vegetables were things only ever served as a grey mush- or potatoes, also served à la *détrempe gris*; or if you were a vegetarian, for some reason, the definition of vegetables also included chicken. Time was when spaghetti was something that came out of a tin and was served on toast, rice was only ever eaten as a pudding, people pretended blancmange was a treat not a trial, a healthy drink was yellow glucose syrup, and semolina was considered both edible and safe to feed to children. Things are different these days, though give it another couple of years and those good old days will be back, but just for the time-being, that's not the case. Because things are different these days. Look at our Sundays. Time was when there was nothing else to do on a Sunday but come to church- yes, times were that bad. Now of course our Sundays have been liberated from the Puritanical Protestant purgatory that was, and we can leap into the sunlit uplands of buying used baby clothes and out of date pot-noodles at a car boot sale, waiting for the supermarket to open and the unsurpassed experience of spending 3 hours trying to get out of the IKEA car park. Things are different these Sundays.

What else? Well, on the whole, these days, people marry later in life. People also die later in life too, which may be related, but that's another sermon. People marry later in life. Couples at St Mary's are usually in their 30s, sometimes 40s or above, only occasionally twenty-somethings, never below. Nowadays if you are married at 18, as so many of previous generations were, people will think that you were at best weird, and at worst probably breaking the law. Not only do people marry later in life, rare is the occasion that a couple tying the knot has not already been living together for some time, often with children for much of that time. Although previous generations might have muttered about living in sin which, as that is the default state of the human race it's somewhat unavoidable- today I think we can all agree that leaving the trip down the aisle till later and trying it out first is eminently sensible. It is. If your marriage is going to be the most important thing in your life, why chance it? You can't rely on the passion you feel right now to carry you through, because something

so bright as that first flame will always burn itself out. Marry in haste, repent at leisure, as the people who used to talk about living in sin used to say. They say you don't really know someone till you've lived with them, so why risk your future happiness when you can have the taster session first and see if it's really soul mates or at least unlikely to end in murder? You might leap in the dark and land on solid ground; equally you may take the plunge and find yourself very quickly out of your depth in a stagnant pond.

Because living in close proximity to another person each day and every day would test the patience of a saint, and you may have noticed that most of those halo wearers were single. Because other people are not like you. And yes, it wouldn't do if we were all the same, but it helps if the person you're intending to share your home, bed and life with are generally heading in the same direction, at the same time, and on the same planet. What may be endearingly eccentric in the first flush of infatuation may take be less intriguing and more really, really irritating a few years down the line. You're always bags-packed in the hall twiddling thumbs waiting early- he's always late. You're excellent at time management; he's the living personification of lastminute.com. You roll up the toothpaste systematically from the end; he squeezes the tube randomly. You like to wind down with a good book and Radio 3; he prefers Blind Date and Ant & Dec. So still are you when you're asleep, the only thing that suggests your still alive is the gentle rise and fall of your chest: when he's a-slumber it's like you've just wandered into the farmyard at feeding time. You think Jeremy Corbyn is the very best way out of the mess we're in right now (which he is); he thinks the Conservative party are still a good bet. You think Donald Trump is a walking disaster orange comb-over threat to world peace: he thinks the President is doing a goo.. actually nobody thinks that. You always see a job through to the end; he's forever leaving it half finished for you to pick up the pieces. And that's just *my* home life. Of course I'm having you on: he doesn't watch Blind Date: he prefers Take Me Out.

So, take your time, try it out first, otherwise you might be spending a lot of time saying through gritted teeth 'Vive la difference!'

And, most importantly, if you want to reach the winning line, take it from me, finish what you've started.

It ain't easy. So much in our lives remains unfinished. Of course much of our time is spent just repeating the same things day in day out 'in toil you shall eat ... all the days of your life' as Genesis (the book not the band) cheerily puts it- a day's work done has to be started all over again the next morning. That's not what I mean. Away from the humdrum, it is one of the certainties and the tragedies of the human condition that rarely does anything truly draw to a close, we seldom draw a line under it or indeed achieve closure: each extra year of life adds an extra item in our baggage. There's always a loose thread somewhere unnoticed, something always lingers on, so much of our life's work remains unfinished, so much constantly hides behind the legend 'under construction'.

As we die later in life you might think it might mean we have the opportunity to achieve more, to add more finishing touches; what it seems to mean of course is that we leave more incomplete, more half-baked cakes, more unfinished symphonies, more still quite a few pieces left jigsaw puzzles, more things held together with string, sellotape, safety pins and wishes.

But not everything. There are exceptions. Baptism being one of them. In a few moments (I know it feels like this sermon is going to go on forever, but trust me there's not too much more to go now) David will be baptised here at St Mary's church and once the water has hit his head (gently of course) three times, that's it. It's done. He can't go back and be un-baptised, not that he'd ever want to be, but just in case he did he can't and not only that he can't ever do it again. He could try but then he'd just be getting wet: nothing special otherwise going on. When David & his

family leave the church today David's baptism will be in one way a *fait accompli*, box ticked, job done, sorted. In one way, yes, but not in another way. Baptism is once, yes; baptism is forever, yes. And, baptism is only the start. It starts here, and ends in heaven. Yes, the service is over, the ritual is done, but what happens at that font is starting and marking the beginning of a process, the first note of the song that starts the show, the first step of the journey that takes a lifetime to complete.

In baptism we are marked indelibly, as belonging to God. You might not be able to see that seal, but God can. And nothing, ever, can remove that mark. Which is, if you think about it, an amazing, awesomely great thing. Christ has claimed you as his own and he ain't ever, but never, going to relinquish that claim. Not if you squeeze the toothpaste the wrong way, not if you persist in watching blind date, not even- though this might be stretching it- not even if you snore every night like an angry wild boar with the mother of all head-colds. God is never going to relinquish his claim on you.

There's no catch, but there is the expectation that you will reciprocate. Where Jesus leads you will be expected to follow. But nobody's going to make you. Nobody's going to force you to keep the promises that you or your sponsors make. Nobody's going to make you to finish what they or you have started.

But why wouldn't you want to? Trying to be a better person, trying to do the right thing- and that's nothing if not what Christianity is all about- trying to do that is a good thing to do. If it's not going to give you a permanent smug grin on your face, it's never going to make you feel bad about yourself. Look at who you're being asked to follow. Look where he's leading you. You really, truly, have *nothing* better to do than to finish what was started the day you were baptised. Wherever you are, whoever you are, you've still enough time left to do it. What are you waiting for?