

There is a venerable witticism, so ancient that, if it were clothing, it would make a bishop's ceremonial garb look like cutting edge fashion. There is a humour so hoary, so long in the tooth that even Ken Dodd would have put it back in the box, a witticism that goes something like this... "What does the world smell like to the Queen?" It smells like a mixture of fresh paint and Flash because everywhere she goes, there's someone a day before working a brush to death slapping on the paint, and the day of the visit, thirty minutes before she arrives someone else is giving it all they've got with a cloth and a mop. Paint and cleaning fluid, that peculiar combination of chemicals is what the world smells like to the Queen.

If you have the luxury of a cleaner, I bet you your house is the tidiest and cleanest it's been all week not after they have been. No it's at its sparkly posh-frocks neatest five minutes before the cleaner arrives. Everybody tidies up for the cleaner.

Every house I visit, in my capacity as priest is either unfeasibly well kept (if they knew I was coming) or well just normal but with an occupant repeatedly apologising for how messy the place is. I guess they have never seen inside a typical vicarage: if they had, they might stop apologising.

We are very easily able to convince ourselves that the relative who comes to stay will be so impressed by their first impression of the eat-your-dinner-off-it squeaky clean house that greeted them on the day they arrived, that they won't notice that after a few days it sinks back into its default state of squalor.

We like to put forward our best side. Even though we know that the Queen and the cleaner and the rector and the mother-in-law all know that all this buffed up and shiny is just a show, and although we know they know we know they know, we still do it. Best face forward, standards to keep up, keeping up appearances, what will the neighbours think and all that, we like to put forward our best side.

And admit it we really don't like it when we think other people are trying to put *their* better side forward. Take this example. There are certain questions that almost inevitably follow on from someone discovering that you are a vegetarian. After forty years of eschewing the flesh it's still pretty much the same pattern every time. First you will be asked 'How long?' Then 'Why did you decide to do that' followed by 'What do you eat?' (well the clue's in the name). For most, that is as far as their interest goes, and it's probably just politeness which, although rarely original is always nice to come across. But some are more belligerent. Your diet is the red rag to their

bull, to them the simple statement 'I am a vegetarian' is equivalent to 'I am a sanctimonious git, please do try to find a chink in my ethical armour'.

Oh, is that a leather belt you're wearing? Surely those are not suede shoes?

And confession time, it's true. It is almost impossible to live in the modern Western world without in some ways being compromised by products that involve the killing of other animals. But the point is, at least some are trying.

As a Christian you may have experienced a similar reaction, someone's knee-jerk desire to rain on your pious parade, to puncture your puffed-up holier-than-thou balloon. You might be taunted 'do you love me' (not in any way you would recognise mate). You might meet with a well delivered slap and be invited to 'turn the other cheek'. Every chancer and con man knows one verse of the Bible for certain 'give to all who beg from you' even if they are often much hazier with the commandment about bearing false witness.

Inevitably it's almost impossible to live as a Christian without in some way being compromised. If you set out to be a good Christian, you will never quite reach the mark, no matter how hard you try, your target will always be just out of reach; try to be good and you will, inevitably fail; try to live an upright life and you will fall flat on your face. Feel better now?

So here are some questions. Does failing make you a worse Christian? Does God only love the pure? Is God desperate for the love of the pious, or for the love of sinners? Will God be impressed if you put your best face forward? Is what God wants from us neat and tidy houses and the smell of fresh paint, Flash and Shake & Vac if by chance he comes a knocking? Does Jesus want success at all costs, will he boot you off the team when you fall flat on your face in the mud, will he tut and shake his head when you only manage half of what he wants?

We can find the answers in a tale about Jesus we can find with the gospels.

Here's what happens. One time Jesus was invited to go dining *Chez Pharisee*. Come round to my place Rabbi- good food and serious spiritual talk: right up your street! We can have no doubt that house had been given a thorough once over: Jesus is coming, get cleaning! So far so good, food cooking, guest sat down, then into this happy little scene slinks the dinner party gatecrasher from Hell. All that effort gone

to waste, the carefully constructed ambience ruined; here comes a woman with as the coy translation puts it 'a bad name' a name like 'Loose' perhaps or 'Fallen' or 'Brazen'. It's a social disaster for the host, like throwing a brilliant party and then Michael Gove turns up. Anyway, the woman not only gatecrashes the soirée, she decides to sit by Jesus feet and then cries on them. As an encore she wipes his feet with her hair!!!- and tops it off by putting ointment on them. It's astonishingly, nay, brazenly intimate thing for anyone to do, but that woman? Given her reputation she may as well have been pole dancing. And what does Jesus do? Jesus just sits there, letting her do it as if this is what happens all the time when you go out to dinner, and completely ignores this woman's reputation as social leprosy. No surprises, the guests start to wonder what sort of holy man this Jesus is after all. Maybe they've made a mistake with the invite. Doesn't he *know* what this woman is?

Of course Jesus does. Jesus knows what everybody calls this woman. He doesn't need to be told. But he's never impressed with name calling. What they call her, her reputation is doesn't figure. What does matter is that woman-with-the-bad-name has seen clearly what the upstanding pillar of the community Pharisee can't: she has realised that the dressings and distractions, the make-up and cover-up isn't going to wash with this guy because he's really not going to be impressed with any act we can put on or front we can cook up. The honesty of the scene is embarrassing, the discomfort excruciating, the only thing she can do is to bare her heart to him, admit to him and to herself the mess she is. Which may or may not be anything to do with the names she is called and the reputation true or not, she has. No show, just the warts & all naked truth. Which turns out to be exactly the right way to approach Jesus. Not putting on the airs and graces, not hiding behind a mask of respectability, not cowering behind convention and conformity, but as we are: flawed, vulnerable, failed, human. The Pharisee and the woman are the same to Jesus; the only difference is one is honest, and the other isn't.

You see, the whole thing about the incarnate God is that he starts where we are: we don't meet him only when we have climbed the holy mountain, undergone the mystic initiation rites, made the prescribed sacrifices, successfully negotiated all the purity codes and kept all the rules. We reach out to him, from where we are, and there he is. This is why what we do here and now matters, why the ins and outs of our lives are ways we meet God, and why not a single one of us can be holier than thou.

As the ancient psalmist sings

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

The whole thing about Jesus is that he comes to meet us exactly where we are. Messed up, self-centred, selfish and sinful and still he comes. Not to scold, not holding his nose at the stench, not wearing gloves lest we dirty his purity; he really isn't interested in what we have done to get where we are now: he wants only that we reach out to him. When we reach out to Jesus, he will take our hand. And when Jesus has taken our hand, he will never, but never, let go.