

According to conventional church wisdom, owning a dog is supposed to be a great evangelism tool for a member of the clergy. This can only mean great things for the future of our furry friends as, faced with emptying churches and even more quickly emptying coffers 'mission' is now the main word in the Church of England dictionary.

OK. Evangelism with dogs. The theory goes that as you are walking your dog in your parish patch your canine companion will be a reason for people to stop and talk: an icebreaker for those who may be tongue-tied or terrified in the presence of the pie holding the leash. If, as so often they are, many are wary of a man in a dog collar, everybody loves a dog in one. So, armed with a Schnauser, a sheltie or a shitzu when somebody meets you in the park and says something to you like 'what a lovely dog! What's his name?' or 'Oh look, a baby husky!' you can go straight into mission mode and say 'Have you found Jesus?' praying that, if they don't immediately run away, their reply isn't something like 'When did you lose him? Was he wearing a collar? Is he microchipped?'

It's a seductive scenario: so many souls saved all thanks to a winsome look, a wet nose and a wagging tail. The dog might play a part as well.

Well just in case the increasingly desperate C of E bishops decide to put obedience training on the curriculum of all theological colleges (best of luck with that one); before the episcopal decree is promulgated that all vicars must from now on be accompanied by a priestly pooch, I think I want to share the benefit of my experience as a dog-owning Rector, and nip this one in the bud, right now.

It is, I know, a poor workman who blames his tools, but, really, my dog, Xin is not a good mission tool. For a start he is a rescue dog. When we got him he only answered (and only occasionally) to the name given him by his previous owners. They had given him a name that was common name in Laos: spelt X-I-N it is pronounced 'sin.' Which, to be honest, is not going to give the right impression if I'm out in Beddington park shouting Sin! Stop that now! Sin! Come here! Happily, X-I-N spells Xin in pinyin Chinese, and is close enough to sin that that dog never noticed the change.

That, however, is the least of the issues with dog-formerly-known-as-Sin. Being a rescue dog means that he refuses to go for a walk after midday and if you *can* persuade him out from under the bed to go out, he must always be kept on his lead, because he is easily scared and you may well spend the next two hours desperately

trying to get him to come back as he equally desperately tries to run away from the leaf that fell off the tree in a really scary way. Cherry on the cake, he is always rude, abusive and aggressive towards any other dog which comes within a 3 metre radius of him, and most humans merit at least a growl and a snarl. The smaller the human, the more teeth are bared. Please, don't even think 'like owner, like dog'. It's not true. He's not that bad.

This means that when out walking the dog, my interactions, rather than adding to the number of those being saved are restricted to, at best apologising when somebody has been growled at or more usually and a lot less usefully shouting at people to control their free range dog which is inevitably trying to attack mine.

Xin is, just about learning to cope with morning prayer without growling at the other attenders, but that's hardly missional. He *has* provided me with any number of sermon illustrations-including this repeat-, again a good thing, but how missional preaching to the choir is, is a disputed point.

Yes, I have once sat through a testimonial where someone claimed that they came to faith after a conversation which followed being bitten by the local vicar's dog. A result I suppose: she might just have well gone to the police. That's not really a mission action plan.

So, in summary, however desperately in need of a mission boost you are, please don't think that you can do it with a dog.

Now, you might be thinking: you know what *Farve*? Maybe you need to get a friendlier dog, then we'll just move along the pews a bit to make room for all the new people who you've talked into the faith. I'm not *that* good, and I doubt anybody is.

A few years ago the Church of England in collaboration with the Evangelical Alliance commissioned some research about evangelism and the state of Christianity in the UK today. The results, as you might expect, were by turns interesting and depressing. One of the most reported findings of this research was that, perhaps unsurprisingly, talking to people about the Christian faith is a lot more likely to put them off than encourage them. A mere 19% of people who had been talked to about Christianity wanted to know more, leaving 81% who really, really didn't, please leave me alone, I'm not interested.

What can we do? We have this good news, hardly anybody wants to listen, and when we can persuade somebody to lend us their ears, we're much more likely to turn them off than bring them on board. What can we do?

In order to answer that question, I think we first need to change it. You see, I think the question we need to be asking is not 'what can we do?', still less 'what can we say': the question we should be asking is 'What can we be?'

Jesus, as his words are reported in John's gospel, says of himself:

*'I am the light of the world'*

Now what is a Christian but someone who seeks to be like Jesus?

Hear what Jesus says about you:

*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

There is the answer to our question: "What can we be?" What we can be, what we must be, is that light.

Light does not talk. It illuminates. It enlightens. It helps us to see more clearly. And it brightens- it makes the world a better place.

How can we be that light?

A small act of kindness is worth a thousand sermons. A quiet determination to build something better starting right here, right now with our own personal world speaks louder than any street corner evangelist ever could.

Reaching out to catch those who stumble. Refusing to play the games of demonising, scapegoating and victimising. Daring to act out of love and irrepressible hope. These are the ways to shine.

When we are, as Christians, what we are called to be, then our light is a reflection of the light of the world. And yes, today, it starts with just the one candle lighting a small corner of the darkness: one day it will be a blaze of glory.