

Even if you are a card carrying hipster, a prominent member of the court of King Nerd, I am sure you will agree that on the whole the march of technology is a mixed blessing. Essentially neutral of itself, how it is used is not. Every time a new bit of kit comes out, each time that component is new and improved it comes accompanied by a nicely balanced brew of pros and cons. So the internet breaks down barriers and massively facilitates communication which means that our world has truly shrunk, we live in a global village, somebody thousands of miles away can become our virtual neighbour and we can all get to know each other better. Two minutes on Twitter or ten seconds glancing at the Daily Mail web site however will indicate to you that this is a mixed blessing.

The motor car has meant that our horizons have been endlessly extended, our potential mobility massively increased, but at the cost of widening girths, wheezing lungs and potentially apocalyptic global warming which may or may not be a price worth paying for not being able to summon up the energy to walk to the shops.

When you do get to the shops you'll find that technology has been hard at work there too. Self-serve checkouts both speed up the whole process and reduce the need for the misanthropic to interact with another human being. They also mean the somebody who used to work on the checkouts is either reduced to hanging around doling out carrier bags, pressing a button every 30 seconds when there's an unexpected item in the bagging area or worse, out of a job. Not a great technological pay off for the staff, but not great for customers either because as self serve checkouts slowly take over, we are slowly losing that great shared cultural experience that is casting a nosy and critical eye over other people's shopping. What silent thoughts we will all soon be missing when we no longer can stand impatiently in the queue while we watch our fellows having hunted and gathered down the aisles disgorge the contents of their trolley onto the belt for our silent perusal. No more will we be able to think

Is any of that actually food?

Or: Well yes you do need to think about dieting but a few bottles of diet cultural coke don't negate the effect of those six family packs of chocolate.

Try: I know you think that quinoa, kale and tofu is going to make you healthy but it won't, because come 10 o'clock tonight you'll be so hungry you'll be slobbering down a kebab without even bothering to get drunk first.

And of course the perennial favourite— You've known you need to find your purse for the last ten minutes. Why has it come as a surprise to you?

If you hadn't realised that this is what the people behind you in the queue are thinking, and I'm pretty sure it's not just me, then I'm sorry if I've ruined your illusions this morning and added even more anxiety to your next trip to ASDA, but, you know what, it could be worse. Because trust me, if people are only ever half heartedly bothered about what you've put on the checkout conveyor, they are always actively interested in what the vicar has in her basket.

Booze? well no surprise there, particularly if you've met their congregation. A large pumpkin (you don't celebrate halloween do you)? A chicken (I thought you were vegetarian, well yes but my mother in law only eats raw meat). Moisturiser (ooh, surely not vanity in a person of the cloth?). Paracetamol (Oh, are you ill Father?) Trust me, I've had all of this, not in the privacy of people's heads, but out loud in public, to me through the years. Apart from stuff about alcohol. Because there's always that unwritten code of silence for the customers of Bargain Booze. For reasons unknown, for some, there seems to be something magnetically fascinating about a priest's provisions.

Maybe this is the fault of the Church of England which in spite of centuries of evidence to the contrary continues to maintain that its clergy must be a shining beacon of Christian virtue which has eventually morphed into a need to at least give the appearance of being better than everybody else. Perhaps enough people have bought that line that when they're out in the supermarket, it's only natural to want to see what the shopping of a good example looks like. Or perhaps you just want to catch Ms holier than thou out.

But really, please don't look in my shopping trolley. Or my wheelie bins. Or into wider aspects of my life. Especially if you're a bishop. Not because I'm the shy delicate kind who hates that sort of thing, and not because there's anything to hide, (especially if you're a bishop) but because there's really no point. Hopefully you're not going to be scandalised or horrified if you take a close look at any minister's life. But I think there may be real dangers- other than me getting embarrassed- by spending too much time looking at church leaders as examples to be imitated.

The whole 'clergy example' thing- like a surprising number of thorny faith issues- probably has at least part of its origin in Paul's 1st letter to Timothy, where the writer says:

*A bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? ... Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders.*

The letter goes on to set the same sort of standards for deacons. It doesn't mention priests as the Christian version hadn't been invented when the scribe put quill to parchment, but all priests are deacons, so no wriggling off that hook.

Now I would say that what is in 1 Timothy is a person spec not a job description. In order to do this job, 'Paul' is saying, the ideal candidate must not be over-fond of a tittle, not likely to waste time that could be better spent, on business ventures and picking fights, and definitely not going to distract everybody from what they should be thinking about by putting in a regular appearance in the *Sun on Sunday*. It's about practicalities, about getting the job done, *not* about setting an example. Shepherds do not set examples to their sheep, not unless they want to spend their time being ignored by sheep who then run away.

Which, of course, let me stress this clearly, is not to say that what I do doesn't matter, or I can do what I want because you really shouldn't be looking. All of us who are Christians are called to be a city on a hilltop that cannot be ignored, a light on the lampstand lighting the whole house, salt giving taste to the world, yeast leavening the dough. But I would like to suggest that there are a handful of reasons why we all should be cautious about cleaving too closely to good examples.

First, a person's behaviour might, yes, come from a deep well of holiness from the inside, but conversely it might just come from knowing they're being watched. Which makes it sound a bit petty and hypocritical but there can be a bit more than that. Here's an example. When the Bishops decreed that clergy cannot enter into a marriage with someone of the same sex, but that we must be welcoming to lay people who do, this doesn't mean that they think it's ok for you but not for me. It means that they think it's wrong for everybody, but the only people they can actually compel to follow their line are the clergy. Perhaps we should think long and hard

before we follow the example of somebody who's doing or not doing something because they've been compelled to.

Second, only one person ever has been perfect, and he certainly never wore a dog collar. We all have our weaknesses, down sides and unpleasant smelling dodgy bits: and by copying another person we have to remember to engage our critical faculties otherwise we may well just end up adding some of their imperfections to our own. Yes, note hopefully, that this imperfect, weak person is trying to imitate Jesus and imitate *that*, but look not at them but over their heads to who they are trying to imitate rather than rubbernecking the car-crash of their life which is in all probability what is in front of your eyes.

And lastly, being a community leader, being a person who people might look up to, being high up in the hierarchy puts you in a position of power; power to influence perhaps, power to coerce higher up. And if Jesus teaching was clear about anything it was 'don't imitate power.'

When Jesus said that we must become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of God he was saying many things: that we must be innocent, that we must be trusting. But above all he was saying that we must be powerless. Children, then and now, are wholly dependent, legally property of their guardians, never have the power to have the last say: in all meaningful ways, they are powerless. That is what Christians must be.

In the gospel today we hear James and John and his mother say to Jesus 'Make us powerful!' Jesus' answer is blunt:

*whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.*

Slaves have no power.

I've gone around the houses a bit today as usual, but we're almost at the end, and here's the point.

There is only one example you, me, bishops, deacons, archbishops and popes should be imitating, because the rest of us however hard we try, however dedicated we are, will always get it wrong.

There is only one person a Christian should look up to and only one person a Christian must try to copy. Copy Jesus.