

It is no wonder the polo shirt has become so popular. It's comfortable and smart and, unlike the traditional suit, shirt and tie combo takes little or no time to get into and, in normal circumstances at least, doesn't involve any class-indicative complex knots or fiddly cuff links. It is even possible to acquire a polo shirt to which a clerical collar can be attached and thus with the minimum effort, turn sad old incumbent into trendy vicar. That's the theory: the result could just be sad old incumbent in polo shirt- you can let me know if I ever decide to sport one. Cheap, colourful, smart, easy: No wonder the polo shirt is popular not just for everyday clothing but also for uniforms for everyone from school children to scouts, from shop assistants to police sergeants.

Just to dispel any suspicions you may be harbouring that I have shares in a major polo-shirt manufacturer, come from a family who made their fortune from polo-shirt patents or, more believably, supplement my stipend with a polo-shirt stall at the PUMA boot fair, I can personally attest that there is a downside to the polo shirt and it consists of the following four words:

"Do you work here?"

When shop assistant uniforms are polo shirts, those four words are always a risk. I suppose it's an unfortunate, perhaps distasteful hypocrisy to take offence to those words being addressed to me, as in order to be mistaken for an employee of Poundland, I had to be in the shop in the first place. Sainsbury's, ok; Harrods, yo; Poundland...? Hmm. But anyway, not long ago, simply wearing a polo shirt and perusing the shelves of the Romford branch of Poundland could render you prone to becoming a victim of mistaken identity. I'm not certain that the confused customer quite believed that I *didn't* work in Poundland: perhaps my naturally downcast face made her think I was just a rude and lazy employee shirking work. At least she *did* ask 'Do you work here?' first rather than launch straight into her query, which did once happen to me in Southend B&Q. Perhaps in future I should always go shopping wearing an 'I don't work here' badge, but then, I guess, rather like the recycling instructions on the church centre bins, nobody would read it till it was too late.

It doesn't take much, we only need to see just the one thing- a polo shirt for example- and in kick our assumptions and off we go.

Potential occasions for mistaken identity are legion and indeed much Shakespeare and almost all *opera buffa* relies on our ability to be fooled by a frock, which must have made suspension of disbelief a real effort when Pavarotti was still treading the boards.

Getting the wrong idea about a person because of what they are wearing can be comic- or irritating if it's you- but our natural propensity to mistaken identity goes a lot deeper than that. Forget such fripperies as clothing. Through all times and cultures, humans have mistaken each other for monsters and pariahs, undesirables and non-persons. We repeatedly make the mistaken-identity mistake of mis-identifying some of our brother's and sisters as not God's children. The urge to make victims is as old as Cain & Abel.

Let's take people with leprosy, for example. Not too many in London, so nobody will feel particularly picked on if we consider them, but they have frequent walk on parts in our Gospels. People with leprosy of course, are one of the oldest cases of mistaken identity victimisation. I'm not decrying the diagnostic skills of Aaron and his sons here, those who, for Ancient Israel, had the task of deciding whether a person spent their days as they would like to or spent their life running away and ringing a bell: without the benefits of modern microbiology, probably most of those outcast in former times as lepers were misdiagnosed. But the mistake was not misdiagnosis of a skin disease, but both the mistake of thinking the a disease made a person unholy *and* the mistake of identifying the person with their disease. Getting the wrong diagnosis is much less common in recent times: the other mistakes are not: just witness the hysteria that still meets people with HIV.

For all those peoples whom humans seek to exclude, we can see the same sort of processes is in evidence- whether it is race, tribe, sexual orientation, gender, immigration status, whatever; it is one arbitrary attribute we have chosen and made the person that thing.

Creating outcasts and victims is a human speciality: from ritualised scapegoats to pogroms, from untouchable castes to civil war, from gated communities to ghettos you could almost say it defines human society.

If you would think that this was something left behind in more primitive times- you know mediaeval superstition and all that- you

may not have noticed the lynch-mobs out there looking to get bankers or benefits claimants or Tories or migrants.

If you would think that victimisation is profoundly unchristian, then you may not have noticed that through the centuries, Christians, like everybody else, have been immensely successful at creating pariah people. Pagans, Jews and Muslims alike have perished by Christian swords, witches and gays have crackled on Christian fires, women have been bound with Christian chains to domestic servitude and second-class status and millions of Africans, Asians and Americans have been enslaved with scriptural shackles.

It used to be very popular to interpret some parts of the Old Testament laws as being practical guides to living in the Middle East, you know, pork goes off in a hot climate so don't eat it and so on. A concern for excluding lepers from society can look very sensible in this particular light: it clearly makes excellent epidemiological sense for a person with a contagious disease to be quarantined so they can't pass it on to someone else. That's why Leviticus is so down on leprosy isn't it? Nope. It's about purity. There were many, many more contagious, infectious diseases around than leprosy: many, much, much more dangerous. The problem with leprosy, for the writers of Leviticus was not the physical effects of the disease, it's the impurity, the unholiness.

If we shuffle away from Leviticus for a moment to our Gospels, all through his ministry, we see Jesus curing people with leprosy. Incredible stuff: so much so that even when the newly cleansed are told to keep quiet about it, they can't. But although healing is involved, a truly fabulous, healing of a terrible disease, these are never stories about healing. Everywhere when we read about healing happening in the Gospels there's something much more going on. The 'wow' factor is not that Jesus healed the person with leprosy: the electrifying shock is that he touched them.

That is remarkable not because Jesus was putting himself at risk of catching leprosy, but because, according to the laws of Leviticus, it would have rendered Jesus unclean, impure, unholy. The disease of leprosy is gone: the man is cured. The thing that really makes the disease unbearable, exclusion on the grounds of religious impurity, is brought into focus and the healing of that most heinous of human social disease, if not accomplished, then at least started.

Recovery may be proving an incredibly long process, but the desire and intent of God is clear. Jesus' first touch of the leper is the repudiation of religious purity and the abolition of religious exclusion once, and for all. We may habitually get it wrong about our brothers and sisters: God never does. We may convince ourselves that our brothers and sisters are unclean but God never has. We may make pariahs and convince ourselves that they are worthy of persecution but God never will. We may think that if we are prevented from excluding, we are prevented from practicing our faith, so we demand exemptions from equalities legislation and then we have mistaken the identity of God.

Last year this parish registered as an Inclusive Church. This means that we have recognised that as Christians we are as likely as anyone else to try to exclude. It also means that we have recognised that, as Christians, we shouldn't, we have recognised that inclusion is right at the heart of our Gospel, compulsory. It means that we will try to ensure that we include everyone in what we do, and listen, really listen, if somebody says we're not. It also means being involved with amazingly good things like Black History Month activities, the Great Get Together and so on: working for inclusion outside these walls as well as in.

St Peter once said:

*"God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean."*

Think of the most abhorrent, repulsive person you can. I'm not going to make any suggestions as to what are the things that would make a person like that: everyone has their own list. Got that person fixed in your mind? It is a case of mistaken identity. Let us pray that God may help us to grow beyond our mistakes.