

From the mundane to the magnificent, from the commonplace to the conspicuous, from the sublime to the ridiculous, there are certain things that simply cannot be done. The label says ‘impossible’ and, try as you may, except for cheating or possibly radical surgery, they are simply outside the bounds of your skills.

Fearsome and wonderfully made you may be, but you cannot lick your elbow, tickle yourself or sneeze with your eyes shut. Elegant and mannered you may be, but you cannot eat a donut without licking your lips, devour two cream crackers without having a drink, or indefinitely put off the urge to spend a penny. I think it’s certain Krispy Kreme are never served at a royal banquet.

These are impossibilities down the bodily (and one would have to say sillier) end of the spectrum, party tricks to impress the very young or the very drunk.

But if we lurch away from the corporeal we will still find life a rush-hour tube carriage crammed with impossibilities itching to greet us with a firm hand shake and a smug smile.

Try as hard as you can but you will never find a post office without a queue, a multi-storey car park with wide bays, an empty checkout at IKEA or anything worth watching on Channel 5. You will never teach a shiba inu obedience, though they will happily teach you to obey. You cannot turn pig skin into silk, make a horse drink water, a cat eat cheap cat food more than once or push a camel through a needle’s eye.

So much there is in life we cannot do, so much to impede and frustrate us.

We cannot be both smart and stunning, slim and satisfied, rich and right; we cannot square the circle, fly unaided, remain ever youthful, turn back the clock or imagine our own deaths; impossibilities hem us in at every turn. And, of course, you may have suspected it was coming, most frustratingly of all it is impossible, absolutely impossible, to succeed at being a Christian.

Christianity's demands cannot be met. If you sit and listen to what Jesus expects of his followers, you'll quickly realise you can't do it. Ours is not, like many religions, a list of rules and demands that may be stringent but they are doable. Oh no. Jesus demands a *lot* more than that. You must go way, way beyond keeping the rules.

Last week we were considering how hard some of Jesus' teachings could be— hating your family was the example we pondered. We've gone a bit further this week: not hard, but impossible.

Let's explore some of Jesus' teachings, straight from the saviour's mouth:

*"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Not just your deeds, but even your thoughts must be pure.

Keeping to the letter of the law is not enough: your life must become the spirit of the law:

*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away*

*Give to everyone who begs from you*

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

To sum up:

*You must be perfect as God is perfect.*

Which , I think you'll agree is impossible.

All the above is from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus lays out his manifesto. These are the entrance criteria for the club, the Membership rules of the Jesus movement; this is what you must do if you are to be his disciple.

And it is impossible.

Yes, maybe, some of it, some of the time. I could turn the other cheek at least until till it really started to hurt. I could hold lascivious thoughts in check for a while perhaps. But all of it, all of the time? Impossible.

It's almost perverse: a religion based not just, as they all are, on the unbelievable, but one better: a religion that wants the unachievable. It doesn't make sense: the demands of Christianity are beyond the capacity of any human.

And yet, Christianity is the most *human* religion of them all.

Because with its impossibly perfectionist demands everybody, but everybody, fails. Which, pretty much, is the human condition in a nutshell. We all fail in the end. All heroes have feet of clay. We're all winners till inevitably, it falls apart. We're only human, we fail in the end.

There was a cultural phenomenon in 1950s USA known as 'the curse of Sports Illustrated'. *Sports Illustrated* as you might guess was a sports magazine— whatever one of those is— and only when an athlete was at the top of their game, would they find their photo beaming from its cover. You'd made it in the world of sport when you were the cover star of *Sports Illustrated*. Only the creme de la creme graced its covers, which stands to reason: it wouldn't exactly tempt many buy it if the cover featured a selfie of the worst defender in the Carshalton Sunday League. Or possibly the Sutton United goalkeeper. However, people soon began to notice something curious and not a little spooky: not long after a person appeared on the cover of the fabled magazine, their career would nosedive, their form fail, and their performance collapse. The gods of sport clearly hated the magazine and struck down anyone who appeared on its cover with their curse. People believed this for quite a while, until some bright spark (read a beginner statistician) pointed out that when you reach the top, there's only one way left to go. All those grade-A sportsmen and women were not spitefully cursed by the gods of publishing; rather, they only appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* when they were at their peak, Inevitably, after peaking, they would fail.

We all fail in the end.

Everybody, but everybody, fails, in faith as much as in sport. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And there it is, written into the very core of the Christian faith.

That, is one of the most important RE lessons we have to learn.

Because when we admit our failure, when we understand that we haven't a cat in hell's chance of success, when the realisation dawns that we are not in the control tower at the centre of the universe, when we allow ourselves and everybody else to fail: then we can stop trying to be in control, stop trying to do it with our own efforts, stop trying by our rule-keeping and law-abiding, stop trying to force God's hand with the power of our faith.

Instead, we can stop and let his love break into our lives. We can *only* do that when we fail. It truly is, as the cliché has it, only the cracks that let the light shine through.

And no matter how shattered the perfection that has slipped from your hands, no matter how appalling the mess you have made of your life, not matter how many the broken shards of your hope are, God's love will still shine through.

As the psalm says,

*A broken and contrite heart O Lord, you will not spurn.*

Yes. And first, you need to know that it's broken.