

If we always remembered someone for the person they truly are, then Fr Peter would, I am sure, be remembered for, his gentle pastoral skills, his quiet but incisive intellect and his love for mediaeval scholastic philosophy. But then it's funny what sticks in the memory, and in the parish where he was many years ago the curate, Fr Peter is mostly remembered for swearing. And no- as will become obvious as the tale proceeds- it's not me in Fr Peter drag: I was indeed curate at the same parish several years later and was treated several times to this tale of my predecessor which I took as a green light to open the priestly Billingsgates. The rest, as they say, is history.

Anyway, one of the tales most treasured by Fr Peter's former parishioners concerns a trip by their curate to the football terraces. Peter, had, as I understand is common at matches, decided to share his knowledge of the more colourful and interesting parts of Anglo-Saxon language with the referee, treating him to a tirade fit to make Beowulf blush. Just as he was getting into his stride and fully letting rip he realised that his swearing- usually a group activity among football spectators- was this time decidedly solo. In fact the people round him were not only not joining in as they usually could be guaranteed to, but were all looking at him in a rather shocked and astonished way. Only then did Fr Peter realise that he had gone to the football match still sporting his clerical collar.

I prefer football in a small box in my living room- turned off- so you are unlikely ever to see me cursing and frothing at the mouth down at Gander Green Lane or any other sports ground for that matter. As some in the church have discovered I am, however, often to be found behind the wheel of a car and thus sometimes my vocabulary, has a, shall we say, interesting emotional range. If you have ever crossed me driving, then please do let me apologise; if you haven't yet, let me apologise in advance.

Self-restraint is one of those things which lubricates the wheels of our social machine, and its temporary absence, especially by someone in a dog collar, can still oc-

casation comment or even astonishment. But it is, it seems, increasingly easy for most of us for emotions to get the better of us. Faced with a ref who's clearly in the pay of the winning side say, or driving near the person who has a piece of paper in their glove-box which says they bought the entire UK road network in 1973 and thus legally do, yes, in fact, own the road, who can remain cool and calm? The shock-jock newspapers, with unconscious irony, have been telling us for more years than anyone can remember that self-control is becoming a much rare commodity in modern-day life.

There is a whole sub-section of the publishing industry dedicated to giving us the gories when the great, the famous and most usually the vaguely celebrity lose their self-control. This is particularly popular if the result is a photo of the said celeb looking stupid, sordid or fat, not something it has to be said, that they usually find too taxing, but it can also be more positive coverage if there are signs of wanton extravagance, unselfconscious exuberance or general party animal behaviour. What would a trip to the dentist be without one?

Of course some of the appeal of all this is the entirely understandable desire to push people off the pedestals they seem determined to climb upon. Much of it is more likely an extension of the cult of the self that saturates our post-Christian culture. If it is not me in the photo or on the front page, well it could be, it one day might be, I'd perhaps quite like it to be: it is still 'I' at the centre of it. I spy something beginning with me.

You will recognise the phrases that permeate our popular idiom. Go on: treat yourself. Be good to yourself. Because I'm worth it. We don't know quite why we're worth it- other than we have the money (presumably) to buy the miraculous conditioner / face mask / kitchen roll / bathroom cleaner and that's enough. I am worth it, because, well because I am. I AM is no longer God, but I am. Sum ergo sum. Nothing, from the economic system that fuels our lives of conspicuous consumption to our obsessive lionising of fame and celebrity encourages self-control.

Which makes it just that bit more of a challenge for us in the UK of the 21st century to sound the authentic Christian voice, because right, smack, unavoidably in the middle of our faith is the greatest act of self-control in humanity's history.

The Islamic faith, though it holds Jesus or Isa as it knows him in great respect, is irreconcilable doctrinally with Christianity, because in Islam Jesus can never be divine. Islam cannot accept that Jesus was the Son of God for the very simple reason that it is inconceivable that the all powerful God would allow his son to be crucified. It is simply incompatible with the omnipotent majesty of God for his son or his incarnation to be subjected to a cruel and shameful death by humanity. All-powerful gods do not end up nailed to crosses. Simple as that. It simply cannot be.

And yet, how much more impressive, how much more an exercise of paradoxical power, how much more divine *not* to stop this happening. The self-control of the cross, how much more like God.

It could, we can conjecture, have stopped at any moment.

Jesus, after all, was not blindly dragged along by events:

*Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day.*

Knowing in advance does not necessarily mean that we can prevent something happening. But let us take a characteristic selection of passages from the gospels to guide our thoughts.

From St Mark:

*She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease... Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?"*

A power that can heal with no conscious effort on behalf of Jesus. Or again from St Mark

*Jesus woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm.*

All sorts of prosaic explanations are available for healing alongside the miraculous: nothing can explain away control over the elemental forces of nature.

From St John: *When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified.*

Even the laws of physics can be neatly put to one side. None of this suggests a man who could be simply swept away by the tide of events. It could have stopped.

When things start to get violent, Jesus even says as much:

*"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"*

he says in the garden of Gethsemane.

When the blindfold was put on him and the taunting and the slapping started; when the first stroke of the scourge hit his back; when he saw the tortured pain of helplessness in his mother's eyes; when the soldiers robbed him of his clothes and his

dignity; when the first nail came searing through flesh and splintering bone. It could have stopped.

It was the father's will that the cup should be drained to the dregs and the obedience of the son that emptied that cup. It could have stopped, but for Jesus the will of the Father overrode any consideration of his self. Self controlled, emptied of considerations of self, when push came to shove, Jesus looked at the scourge, the crown of thorns, the nails, the cross, then looked into the faces of the baying crowds, the impassive officials, the cruel soldiers, the vindictive priests, the grieving women, the fairweather-friend cupboard love disciples; he looked at you and me; and said 'you're worth it'.

There can never be 'New Age' christianity, because the 'New Age' is all about self. Our faith is about another self: the self-emptying self of Christ Jesus.