

It may not look like much, but this little piece of white plastic that nestles round my neck, the thing that marks me out as an ordained minister of the Church of England, this little bit of white plastic changes the world. It makes people change the way they behave; sometimes they become impeccably polite. Sometimes, like me walking past a policeman, even though entirely innocent, they're suddenly self conscious, as though this collar allows me to read minds. And as I mentioned mere days ago, people forget how to swear, instant amnesia for the profanities they have known and lavishly peppered their conversation with since adolescence. But more amazing than that effect is this: with the plastic on, if a cuss word should, as is inevitable, escape from the conspiracy of clean-speaking, there then follows a whole series of profuse apologies. It is not just Churchgoers who feel the need to say sorry. When the chap in front of me in the queue for the veg stall in London's Chapel Market was abused by the stallholder in words of, I have to say, singular and impressive inventiveness, in 10 seconds trebling my vocabulary of unrepeatable insults; even then the small businessperson felt obliged to say 'sorry Father' when she noticed the little slip of white nestling atop my black shirt.

Now, whatever wrong swearing represents is surely minor league stuff, even for the most colourful cussing that the London markets have to offer. Despite what the schoolyard lore may say to the contrary, there is nothing clever or indeed desirable about swearing and it is not even especially interesting. The almost reflex cessation of cussing in the presence of a clerical collar or in a church building (wait till we get outside Father then I'll tell the dirty joke) however, is fascinating; for what it tells us about our attitudes to holiness, to the Church and to sin.

Many of our fellow citizens treasure the rather strange idea that if they were to open the door of their local Church on a Sunday what they would see would be row after row of pallid saints on their knees, white robes billowing and halos shimmering, bathed in the glow of ethereal heavenly light. There is a powerful perception, in other words, that churches are full of holy people. Now this is quite clearly a perception based on a misconception based on a lack of experience of churches, but unfortunately it is very often true. Churches *are* often full of holy people, of at least of people 'being holy' in the worst possible way.

A couple of examples. Many places of worship, are filled with holy happiness, what Timothy Radcliffe describes as 'that grim resolution to be happy which one finds with some Christians who feel that it is a moral obligation to smile all the time because

Jesus loves us', [not something I hasten to add frequently seen at the 8 o'clock mass,]; 'the fixed smile of a pre-booked place in paradise'.

At the other end of the spectrum is the church of icily silent holiness, where worship, of a complexity designed to keep the uninitiated uninitiated, proceeds with clockwork precision; each individual worshipper, with their individual direct line to the divine, is radiant with the cool, smooth chill of the plaster saint.

There are many and various ways in which Christians spend their time in and out of church trying to be holy- not swearing in front of the clergy is of course a perennial favourite, and I'm sure we have some of our own peculiar ones at St Mary's, but here's the bad news: the church is not a club for the holy; it is as St Augustine famously said, a hospital for sinners. What he meant is not that the church must do its Christian duty and tolerate a number of sinners in its midst; we're not like property developers who must grudgingly provide some social housing while they get on with the real business of building luxury apartment blocks. The Church- from the Pope downwards- (or if you want to be Anglican, from the Archbishop upwards) comprises entirely of sinners. If we have heard the call of Jesus, it can mean only one thing. I have come, Jesus says, to call not the righteous but sinners.

To see quite what this might mean we have only to turn to our sacred Scriptures, and we find that the last thing those hallowed pages contain are a series of edifying tales of the squeaky clean and sanctimonious.

Take the famous King David, David the giant-killer, David chosen by God himself to be the first and greatest of the Kings of Judah; David reputed writer of all the psalms we sing each Sunday at Evensong; David ancestor of the Messiah. This very same David, was also an adulterer and a murderer. David is not the bad apple in the Biblical barrel. He's a long way from being the worst of the bunch: in fact he's one of the best.

Jacob was a swindler and trickster; Jacob's sons, patriarchs of the twelve tribes sold their brother into slavery; Joshua was an early perpetrator of ethnic cleansing; Jonah an inveterate coward; Elijah a man who thought nothing of slaughtering the entire priesthood of Baal in a religious pogrom; the Maccabees murderous religious fanatics. In case we might think all this grubby nastiness is a male preserve, let us not forget our sisters Jael whose idea of camping was to roll Sisera up in a carpet and hammer a tent peg through his head, Rahab who betrayed her entire city to the slaughter or Judith whose pious adventure of deception and cold-blooded murder has challenged

moralists for 3 thousand years. In case we are tempted to discount all this as crude Old Testament gung-ho we can remind ourselves that the founder of our Church, St Peter was an apostate, St Paul at the very least an accessory to murder, St Matthew a tax collector, in the days when tax collecting was, how shall we put it, something of a more hands-on job than it is today, (St Mary Magdalene a lady of negotiable virtue), St Simon the zealot a terrorist.

The pervasive presence of this parade of Scriptural shame can have quite startling implications.

The Dominican Herbert McCabe put it like this:

*'Let us be clear' he says 'the people who are really welcome in the Catholic Church are the murderers, rapists, torturers, ... the sadistic child molesters'*

Now this is a provocative statement if ever there was one, it is extremely uncomfortable, it is shocking, it is offensive. But if it were not true, if the body of Christ were only for the clinically pure, only for the pre-saved, there would be no body. If Christ was available only for the holy, well the feeding of the five thousand would have been a lot quicker, a lot cheaper and a lot less impressive: it would indeed have been Jesus, on his own, eating a large fish sarnie.

Now, to say that murderers, ethnic cleansers, racists, are welcome in the Church is not to say that racism or murder is. This is a distinction that is so glaringly obvious that we frequently miss it, as history from the Crusades to Cromwell vividly demonstrate. God did not love David because he was an adulterer and murderer; he loved him in spite of it and not because of it. And if he could love David or Judith, St Matthew or St Paul, warts & all, then he can love us.

I'm not suggesting that, well the Bible's full of sinners so sin does not matter, or that we can do what we want and say sorry when done. Our actions will have consequences, each time we sin we put our own shoulder to that of the soldier thrusting his spear into Jesus' sacred heart; all that we put between ourselves and God will have to be removed, all that keeps us apart from God will need to be purged.

What the Bible's procession of unpleasant, unscrupulous, and unsavoury characters does show us is that there is nothing we have done that can exclude us from the love of God.

Jesus calls us as sinners; and sinners we remain, but we are sinners called to holiness. Our holiness must be that of warmth and welcome but we can drop the rictus of righteousness; our holiness must be flexible enough to prevent us becoming alabaster saints but without becoming capricious; our holiness must be that which recognises our sinfulness and yet rejoices in our belovedness; our holiness must be above all honest. Take a reality check, because the reality of God's relationship with his people is so much better than we could ever dare to imagine: it is the reality of God's forgiveness, God's compassion, God's love.