

I really should be standing here saying this wiping the sweat from my forehead while we're panting in the the dog days of summer, but they really don't make them like they used to do they? Time was, not long ago, back when we was nippers, when summers were proper summers, back- blistering lobster-pink tanning ground-parching fry an egg on the pavement, proper summers, hot as they were long. And now we're on it, winters were proper winters-proper icicle snapping brass monkey busting water freezing in your bath cold and you had to go to school on a sledge, that's if you could dig through the snow drift that was burying the house. And Christmases were always white Christmases, and the churches full of young people who didn't want all these fancy gadgets for presents but were happy with an orange and maybe a wooden top if they were a bit aspirational, like.

Back to the heat. Recognise the picture? Assuming you've stayed at roughly the same latitude, almost everyone thinks their childhood summers were more, well, summery than summers now. It's not global warming that's changing the weather. It's not that we've entered a mini ice age or that the pall of pollution overhanging our cities is blocking out the sunlight. It's not any of those reasons making our recent dog days damp squibs because it's almost certainly not true. Think about it: all generations remember the real summers when they were young, and have been for at least a hundred years. Which does rather suggest that it's not the weather that's changed, it's you.

So here's the question for today. Where is the time where childhood ends? When comes the tipping point where long hot summers become short overcast disappointments, where christmas card chestnut toasting santa baiting seasons become bone break slipperiness and extortionate gas bills? Where does childhood end?

Is it when the penny finally drops in the what-the-butler-saw slot and you realise the physical acts that must have occurred in order for you to come bloodied and bawling into the world? Is it when you have your first crush? Is it on the last day of the last term of school? Your first job? Your first car? Your first tattoo? Do we go with the law and say your eighteenth birthday? What do you think? I'm b. d. sure I don't know. It's difficult to pinpoint when childhood ends. Could be the transition is so slow it's imperceptible, so gradual we just can't see it. Could be. And it might be that perhaps,

just perhaps, it never does. We think we grow up, but maybe most of our adult life is the nastier elements of year 2 gone riot in the dressing up box. Maybe our bodies grow the bulges, but our brains stay basically the same; once we have our basic psychological toolbox, we may occasionally polish its contents but rarely think to add anything new.

It may be a bit more obvious in Donald Trump but for all of us, it usually doesn't take a great deal of time to see the child hiding behind the adult, sometimes wide-eyed and credulous and sometimes tantruming and stamping his feet. There's a particular bit of the kid's kit that we tend to cling on to that I want to mainstage today.

You will be familiar with the scenario. Who's been crayoning on the walls? Who knocked over the vase? Who put soil in grandad's car's petrol tank? Who tied your little brother to the fence with gaffer tape?

It was him. It was her. It was my brother. It was my sister. It was Mr Nobody. It wasn't me.

It was you. I saw you.

Yes, but she made me do it.

I didn't do it, and if I did, it was somebody else's fault. It is I always someone else's fault. Sometimes it is even the person we did it to's fault.

Fast forward through adolescence (best way I think) to adulthood and you'll find very little has changed. I didn't do it, and if I did, it was somebody else's fault. Somebody else is always to blame, be it the Europeans or the Americans or the Lib Dem council or the Tory government (it actually usually is them) or the immigrants or the feckless young or the selfish elderly or the driver in front of me or the sudden gust of wind that blew my car over 30 mph just at the speed camera or this morning it's the Sea Cadets and their car boot sale. There is even a particular religious variant of this, which, finally, is where I wanted us to end up this morn/even ing, which goes something like this:

'I'd love to say that that's okay, I'd love to agree with you and I believe that too and I can't see what the problem is myself but the Bible says...'

Now I'm assuming with this that if you are saying 'the Bible says this, I thought about it and although I don't think so, the Bible does', you are a good person. I reckon you are probably a Christian who is trying to do the right thing and therefore you've taken the time to think things through, and when it turns out that what you think is different to what the Bible seems to be saying, you've concluded that it's you that must be wrong.

You may conclude that. I disagree.

It's not that the Bible is wrong. In a sense that's an impossibility, not because it's infallible, but because right and wrong is simply not the property of a library of books. So it's not that the Bible is wrong. But the way we interpret it often is.

At the moment, most usually what it is is the role of women in home and work; or marriage and home life; what children should or shouldn't do; in the past it has been slavery or imperialism or beating your children. I didn't want to. The Bible made me do it. It didn't. You interpreted it. You did it.

I know it would be really, really fabulously great if the Bible was the manual for life, the users guide to being human, the A to Z of Christianity. But it isn't. The Bible is not there to tell you what to do and what not to do. The Bible is there to tell you about God, and it tells you about God not by literally repeating his instructions, but by teaching you to search for the deeper meaning of things, to see through the surface to the truth beneath. And you *have* to be able to see beyond the surface, because dancing on the top of that paper-thin ice is the elephant in the room, and this elephant is not just in the room, it's painted bright orange, doubly incontinent and singing the Hallelujah chorus out of tune at the top of its voice. Right on the surface of the scriptures is some pretty awful stuff indeed.

Our OT reading this morning (Genesis 37: 1-4; 12-28) is a case in point. It might have seemed innocuous enough to you but that's because we're all used to the West End version courtesy of Andrew

Lloyd Webber: the true tale has all the gothic horror of the Grimm brothers without the goat-eating trolls (Twitter hasn't been invented yet). What have we heard? We have the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. They hate their brother so much they decide the best thing to do is to kill him. And tell their father it was a lion what did it. When one of them pipes up that that might be a tad OTT, they relent, and sell him into slavery instead. That's near the start of the tale that ends the first book of the Bible. What comes before is hardly a shining example. Let's review the story.

(A warning. Some viewers may find this report distressing. There are however no flashing images unless you count the bit where Ham chances upon Noah dead drunk and naked in his tent. Here then are the edited lowlights of Genesis.)

Adam and Eve disobey a direct command from God and get thrown out of Paradise to scrape a living from the ground and spend an eternity in the pains of childbirth. One of their sons murders the other because he's more popular than them. After a good deal of going forth and multiplying humankind has covered the earth and- no surprises here- is being so repulsive that God decides, apart from one family, to destroy the whole lot in the mother of all floods. When the waters finally go down again, he promises not to go quite that extreme ever again. Which is very definitely a good thing as barely had Noah's socks dried out than Abraham chucks out his concubine and her son in to the desert to die and God tells him to sacrifice his other son which he sets off without demurring to do. Then God decides to destroy the cities of the plain where Lot is living and when the men of the city want to attack the angels God sends to warn Lot he offers them his daughters instead for their amusement before his wife is turned to stone for looking back. Then Jacob cheats his brother out of his inheritance and then out of his dying father's blessing which means he's on the run because his brother is out to kill him and then Jacob is cheated into marrying the wrong girl and working another seven years for the girl he actually wants. Jacob's daughter is raped: her brothers wreak revenge by persuading the family of Shechem to be circumcised and then slaughter them while they're in post-op recovery. Judah mistakenly sleeps with his daughter in law who is pretending to be a prostitute. Finally we have the whole Joseph tale which is pretty gruesome, especially if you're a baker. I've given you the sanitised

version. It takes a long time in the history of the chosen nation before it gets any better than that.

I'm not pointing this out because I don't want you to read the Bible. I'm pointing this out because I *do* want you to read the Bible. And read it in a way that help you to glimpse the unfathomable depths of God's love. If you get stuck on the surface, you'll never experience those depths.

When almost at the beginning of Genesis God says 'let us make humanity in our own image' that must mean many things about us, one of the most important is that he made us as creatures able to think for ourselves, able to use our minds and our reason to work things out.

With a Bible open, you will meet God by reading, grappling, thinking, arguing, disagreeing and praying with it. Not by skimming along is surface. So please, please, read your Bible. Just don't take it literally. It's too precious to treat it like that.