

Gall bladder, appendix, pineal gland, thymus, tonsils, Trump brains- I know we had that sermon a month ago and I'm not that shameless with my recycling, but when we took a look at apparently useless anatomy that was quite important after all, you seemed to quite like it. Such frail egos we preachers have, we do notice these things. When you say 'nice sermon Vicar' we actually believe it. All that talk of cinderella viscera seems to have hit the sweet spot for a sermon; education, entertainment and a bit of theology tacked on the end. So as poking around your insides was such a potboiler I thought I'd keep on yanking at the milch cow and as I think we've exhausted interesting things to say about the appendix- we could move this time on to hormones.

Hormones. Remember those? The overnight acne, the sudden unaccountable crushes, the hot flushes? Hormones, chemical messengers that flit around the human body telling adolescents that now they are no longer children nobody understands them, telling middle aged women to open all the windows and middle aged men to think dressing in lycra and riding an expensive bike is an appropriate and dignified way to enter their autumn years. That's just the reproductive ones: inside of you is a whole Boots the Chemists of physiological messengers regulating everything from your metabolism to your sleep-wake cycle. Some you'll instantly recognise, some you won't but you've got the box set: Testosterone, progesterone, oestrogen, thyroxine, adrenaline, vasopressin, calcitonin, cortisol, oxytocin. The reason I've landed on oxytocin is that many moon cycles ago when I was engaged in a rudimentary study of physiology, oxytocin was the appendix of the endocrine system: it caused increased lactation in nursing mothers, but it was also sloshing around in women at other times- and also in men. But why and doing what, well nobody knew.

Time, of course, tends to solve most mysteries (though I doubt it will ever explain the last 5 years of UK politics) and about twenty years ago researchers declared they had solved the oxytocin enigma: it was the 'love' hormone. (that wasn't the name the researchers used of course, that was the Express). Oxytocin turned out to be the endocrine equivalent of drinking and drinking and drinking till everybody's your best mate and you really love them. *And* your body makes it for free, everybody buys their own round and you don't wake up in the morning next to a stranger covered in vomit and with your phone displaying a set of unaccountably embarrassing photos of yourself you have no memory of but are now all over... your mum's Facebook feed. That's what happens when you get drunk isn't it? Unlike alcohol, oxytocin gives you all the love and none of the letdown all the gain, none of the pain. Even when you and your dog look each other in the eye you're both

pumping out a swoosh of oxytocin. Finally we knew what Tristan and Isolde drank, though we'll never know what Wagner was on.

For a while oxytocin research was a boom industry but alas, it wasn't long before the serpent appeared in paradise, and it turns out that the 'love hormone' was in fact the Priti Patel of the endocrine system. Yes, Oxytocin increases good-feeling bonding with your kith and kin, people you recognise as your own. But at the same time it increases negative feelings about people who aren't in your tribe. It's the echo chamber hard baked into nature's cake.

OK, those of you who have listened to a handful of these homilies will know that now is the time I switch to the religion bit, but please hold on to the oxytocin, because it is connected. I think this odd hormone can help us to better our thinking about what is known as 'natural theology'.

You might not recognise the technical term, but it's a pretty good bet that if you've spent any time in your life thinking about God you will have at some point been thinking along the lines of natural theology. What natural theology is, is the belief that, because God is the creator of everything, then you can learn about God, the nature of God and— more relevant to us (because it's always about us) — what he wants. You can learn that by 'reading' his creation, a sort of reverse engineering if you like. Nature, so the theory goes, can teach you theology, and by corollary, what is 'natural' is what God intended. God made the world, he saw that it was good; so we too can see what he made and know what is good. Seems reasonable enough. Much of the time that's how we think without even knowing we're thinking it.

I'm sure you can hear the 'but' coming. But, however attractive that idea might seem, there are some real problems with natural theology.

First, for humans at least, it's almost impossible to know what is 'natural' and what is 'cultural'. There are no humans in the wild we can observe and so often what we think of as 'natural' is simply a cultural norm. For example, what is natural in human bonding? One man, one woman 2.1 children ? Or one man, two women, 12 children— as it was for Jacob. Or one man, one thousand women, unknown children, for Solomon. Or one man, unknown women, unknown children... What is 'natural' is sometimes impossible to know, so we lazily replace 'natural' with 'normal' in our thinking and our theology, which is, to say the least, not very helpful. They're two very different words.

A second problem is that nature is patently and unignorably not what we want it to be. If nature tells us about God, what it tells us is uncomfortable indeed. Nature is red in tooth and claw, horrifically and pointlessly cruel— just watch a cat with a mouse— and highly dangerous to God’s beloved creation, from a crocodile’s jaws to a coronavirus. Nature often rides roughshod over long cherished assumptions; gay lions, same-sex penguin couples, and the society of our closest genetic relative— the bonobo ape— don’t sit well with theological prejudices. These aspects of nature challenge the assumptions of natural theologians who tend to wriggle round the inconvenience in either of two ways. 1—‘yes, nature is cruel, and so is God’- and I’m sure you can see the problem with that. Or, 2: Well it’s not *real* nature, it’s *fallen* nature. When Adam ate the apple, and fell from grace he dragged all of nature along with him, that’s why you have things like viral disease and vultures and homosexuality. That’s a very commonly held belief. I hope you can see the problem with that. Because, if nature fell with Adam, then tiny birds and pretty flowers and fluffy bunnies and golden wedding anniversaries and everything else are *also* fallen: the stuff theologians like, just as much as the stuff they don’t. Going down this road, you have to believe that when nature fell, some of it fell further than other bits, and though my phobic self knows that that is the case for spiders, it’s really a very silly position to hold.

Natural theology’s final problem (at least for today, thank you for your patience thus far) is that sometimes what God chooses to reveal to us in Scripture, tradition and so on seems to run entirely contrary to what we think we read about him in nature. Such as our old friend, oxytocin. With a faith that’s all about love, you’d have thought the ‘love’ hormone would be one of the few parts of God’s plan writ in nature.

But listen to what Jesus says about love:

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies*

Love your neighbour and hate your enemy: sounds precisely like oxytocin at work. And further, when you’re lost in a hormonal haze of love for your nearest and dearest, inconveniently Jesus pops up again to say:

*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.*

And let’s not even start on:

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*

I hope you're still with me. Time to start wrapping up the sermon, not long now.

So, God has created us. We have a hormone running round our bodies saying 'Love your neighbour, hate your enemy'. But God has ordered us directly: Love your neighbour, love your enemy'. How do we square that circle? Do we say 'nature is fallen', QED? Do we say that God is capricious and is now asking us to go against the nature he created? Just because he can? Or perhaps that the gospel writers got it wrong and it was love your neighbour hate your enemy all along?

For a solution I would head elsewhere, to the gospels, to the parable of the sheep and the goats, and those central lines of our faith

*'just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters you did it to me.'*

All people are Christ's siblings; we are family. So the ultimate Christian reality is that there are no enemies, only family; no others, only kindred; no out-group, only siblings. A physiology that's telling you to love your kith and kin is not a problem for Christianity *if* we have arms wide enough to embrace all humanity as our siblings, just like the arms stretched out on the Cross. It's *not* in our nature to hate others: quite the contrary. But we are not merely physical creatures: we are social and cultural ones too, and our understanding, behaviour, feelings and motivations are interpreted through those prisms- and distorted- till it takes God's son dying on Calvary to so show us who our family really are. And a lot more effort to start to act like that is so.

Trying to read God's intent from nature is a fraught endeavour. Creation is moving towards its consummation: what we can see now is not the end point, it's part way on the journey. What we observe is not the end product, but God's mid-plan, coming into being, moving towards perfection. Everything's in place, ready and waiting. We just haven't got with the plan yet.

But.

Nearer and nearer, draws the time.