

We learn many useful psychological skills early in life, skills which make it possible for us to live reasonably ordered, useful and if we're particularly lucky, occasionally happy lives later on. Accurately reading facial expressions, fairly accurately adding up, waiting for things, thinking before we speak or act. Some of course we learn to perform better than others. One of the less obvious but most important is the skill of holding two entirely incompatible thoughts at the same time.

Whole careers in psychological research have been made investigating how we manage- or don't manage- this interesting trick. Psychologists, who can never resist two big words where smaller ones would do name this cognitive dissonance. Two thoughts come together and instead of making the sublime harmony of Mozart create Stockhausen.

Let's illustrate with an example.

Thought one: I am an interesting, witty and amusing public speaker

Thought two: Every time I deliver a speech I see a row of stony bored faces and sometimes I'm sure I can hear the sound of snoring mixed with the restless shuffling.

These are thoughts that clearly cannot inhabit the same logical space: people do not fall asleep when presented with a sparkling and engaging oration, so one or the other thought has to give. Put David Cameron and Gordon Brown together in a small room and one of them will have to go. The tension between incompatible thoughts must be resolved.

Perhaps it is that your listeners are always up partying all night and therefore find it beyond physiological endurance to stay awake. Maybe they are all native Hakka speakers and only pretend to understand English, having learned a few useful phrases like 'good morning' and 'nice sermon' but never really understanding a word you say. Could be- unlikely but you never know- that you're not quite as witty and amusing as you think. Any of these possibilities would resolve the tension, with varying degrees of personal satisfaction.

Much of the time, these types of tensions simply cannot be resolved: sometimes it is essential to hold the two things together even if they are furiously pushing each other apart like the poles of a magnet. Driving a car offers 'this is an extremely dangerous pursuit and I am seconds away from death' together with 'I like life and this is the most realistic way I can get to where I am going'. Allow either thought to

gain precedence and you're not likely to get where you're going. It is in your own best interests to let the tension stay even if it can be resolved.

Sometimes it is in the nature of things that they cannot be resolved. 'This excruciating ear-gouging tongue-bitingly cheek-chewingly cacophonous noise is unbearable' cannot live harmoniously with 'isn't it wonderful that my child is trying so hard to learn to play the violin'. Unresolvable, the tensions must be held together in balance.

All of which amounts to a learning-in-life of a rather useful faith-skill for Christians, for we have a faith that is full of beliefs that brazenly wear their contradictions on their sleeves, doctrines that are like two angry cats in a sack, theology that makes any other paradox seem pedestrian.

Our faith demands that we see Christ in others. This is a basic belief. And yet we are somehow asked to see He who was without sin in what can quite often be, as the old Prayer Book puts it 'miserable offenders'. Seeing Christ in Mother Theresa of Calcutta or Michael Ramsey or Pope John Paul, no prob: but in Adolf Hitler or Myra Hindley or Fred West? The challenge is taut to snapping: the tension is profound and not just emotional but intellectual.

Jesus Christ: True God and True man. How can this be? How can Jesus be both fully a human and fully God. These are mutually exclusive categories. God. Man. East. West. Ne'er the twain shall meet.

Bread and wine, body and blood? No end of conceptual difficulties in that one. If the box is already full- of bread say, how can there be room in the box for body?

And the particular paradox for today: God as Trinity? Three in one, one in three? God the Father. God the Son. God the Holy Spirit. But just one God. Erm, excuse me, didn't these people do maths at school? Cos the sums don't add up. Although we are so used to formula 'in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' at the start of every mass, in every blessing, at every baptism, it is just that: a formula, a mantra, and if we look just a little closely at what is being said... it makes no sense at all. It just doesn't go.

Of all the doctrines of the Christian church the Trinity is the one that's the mental equivalent of the sound of a cat walking on the piano accompanied by a toddler clanging pans lids while the dog -on heat- whines in accompaniment. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, a cognitive cacophony without peer.

Or at least it should be. But contrary to all expectation the Trinity gives us the sweetest of all the sounds of the Christian faith, a delectable triad of euphony, because what we need to understand of our three-in-one God is explained in three words. God is Love.

Hear what St John says in his 1st letter:

*Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.*

Forget the shamrocks; forget analogies of the mind; mixtures of oil, wine and vinegar; interlocked rings and all the other ways we try and fail to understand the Trinity: we need only one word to understand the inner life of the godhead; that word is love: love and we have understood.

You will hear at the summit of many sermons a proscription or prescription, directions on how to live, the practical lessons we can draw from the Scriptures we hear or read, the preacher telling us what we should or more often should not do. It's always a temptation for a pastor: give them a list of do's and do not's, a highway code of commandments for every occasion, a handbook and roadmap for the Christian faith. Pop a Bible into their hands and say 'there you go, it's all in there' and trust that they will open its pages, read the scriptures and find the answers they need there. All Christians indeed should have their noses in their Bibles so much that you can read the words on them, but although we find comfort and guidance in Scripture; we will meet God in many and varied ways as we read and hear it; and we will find all that our faith comprises within or emerging from it, the Bible is not 'God: The Missing Manual'.

To live the Christian life, to live the life God wishes us to live we need only a very simple rule of thumb, there is indeed only one surefire way of knowing that we are being true to our God and our faith. When we ride the waves of 21st century living, as we examine our lives, as we find ourselves with decisions to make, we must ask ourselves: 'Where is love in this picture?' Where love is, there is God and if love is not there, neither is God.

*If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing*

St Paul famously says in his first letter to the Corinthians.

We can ensure that we keep the sabbath and honour our parents and do not worship idols, commit adultery, take the name of God in vain, steal, murder, covet or bear false witness. But if we keep all the commandments and our lives are not lives of love, we are obeying the rules not living the life; slowing down for the speed camera and nothing more.

*In Christ Jesus* St Paul writes to the Galatians *the only thing that counts is faith working through love*. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And God is Love.