

Christians, you may have noticed, argue a lot. It's not just the Church of England. Yes we exist in a constant state of mild bickering which periodically erupts into a bit of an argy bargy, but as far as rowing goes the 21st century Anglican church are rank amateurs pretty much tiptoeing from one storm in a teacup to another. More tea vicar?

From the very earliest days; before even Jesus had marched the Via Dolorosa to Calvary his disciples were disagreeing, disputing. It's not a good thing that Christians argue, but like a freshly bathed dog heading straight for the muddiest part of the field, there does seem to be something of an inevitability about it. Sometime these arguments are relegated to history and have no real effect on us. Nobody has lost their life for at least 1000 years because of the homoousios clause, for example- very few know indeed what it is. Mediaeval theologians never did argue about the number of angels that could dance on the head of a pin-: worse, they had heated altercations as to whether Christ could have been incarnate as a cucumber. It would certainly take prodigious amounts of alcohol before theology would cause a fight on Wallington High Street on a Saturday night, and even then nobody would have the slightest idea what they were actually fighting about. Plus ça change.

There are some rows Christians have had in the past that still cause trouble, and though they may not anymore end up ending lives they can still blight them. There are some ideas that Christians have thrown up that, though clearly pernicious, are very clever and are constructed in such a way that they are almost impossible to refute. Such ideas persist with us still.

Adam had some of the strongest belief I have ever come across. His faith in the Bible and in God's providence, was unshakeable and that is why he stopped going to church.

You see, there was something in Adam's nature- he was gay, and no it's not me in an Adam costume- that meant that in the eyes of his church, and in his eyes, he would always be a sinner. He would be, of course, but not because of his orientation.

Now if you've been coming to St Mary's long enough- a couple of weeks say- or listened to some of the sermons past the jokes at the beginning, you'll know that being a sinner is not a reason not to come to church; quite the opposite. And we're pretty confident that you will come to church a sinner and leave a sinner: less of a sinner perhaps, but still a sinner, which is pretty much just as it is. Adam however went to a church that held rigorously to the Reformation arguments of Jean Calvin. Arguments such as 'God has, before they are even conceived, consigned the vast majority of humanity to eternal punishment, because He loves them. Nobody God has decided to save will persist in being a sinner; therefore anyone who does persist in being a sinner has obviously been given a one way ticket to Hell by God.' Thanks Jean.

It is a thoroughly daft idea, but then we Christians do tend to make friends easily with daft ideas. You'd have had more chance of persuading a hungry shark that's just committed to a feeding frenzy not to eat you than convince Jean Calvin that he was wrong. Jean Calvin was without a doubt a very clever man. So sharp indeed was he that not only did he cut himself but lots of other people too. Now if, like most sane listeners you heard the phrase 'God will, before they are even conceived, consign the vast majority of humanity to eternal punishment, because He loves them.' and just thought 'what a load of old...' well I'm glad. It means at least somebody has been doing their work right. But be wary: the argument known as 'double predestination' is constructed in such a way as to be almost impossible to refute, its logic is inexorable. I have heard it argued with no let up, time and time again, by Adam even, long into the small hours. It's quite simple. God knows everything and God can do anything. He knows everything that will happen before it happens and nothing happens unless God wills it. We are told that not everybody will go to heaven, some will go to the place of weeping and grinding of teeth. And that will happen because God has decided it will happen and- and here is the scary bit- *there is nothing you can do about it.* It's tough, but then sometimes God's love is tough love.

As with any obnoxious argument from the fringes of Protestant extremism, Biblical proofs will be not long coming and it won't be long before any Calvinist will point out Exodus to you, the plagues and Pharaoh. Read the book. God sends a plague upon Egypt, Pharaoh relents and then God hardens his heart and Pharaoh changes his mind. Over and over again. Despite repeated attempts to display his better nature. God sets Pharaoh up for a watery end at the bottom of the Red Sea.

It's all so convincing, it would be depressing. But it is wrong.

Jousting with Bible quotes is never the best of ideas- choose your quote and you can prove almost anything- (apart from Teresa May being a good prime minister- some things are beyond possible) but there are so many parts of our Bible which pour cold water on the heat of Reformation self-righteousness that they cannot be ignored. One of the most important we heard in our Gospel reading this morning.

Now you might have thought that the parable of the Sheep and the Goats was a pretty nightmarish scenario. It strikes many as a very scary tale indeed. The judgement is uncompromising and as there will always have been hungry, naked, sick people we could have fed, clothed, visited but haven't, we are all guilty. It is a worrying tale, at least until you hold it up for comparison against some of Jean Calvin's brighter ideas.

Let us not beat around the burning bush. The parable of the sheep and the goats is a stern warning. From the goats' perspective it is a chilling tale. If you felt just a little bit uncomfortable when we heard it just now it wasn't those awful uncomfortable pews. It is an uncomfortable enough reading indeed that I have heard preachers trying to soothe jangling nerves by saying that it is only a parable, only a story. Well, yes, parables do not talk of fact, obviously, but they do talk of truth. In the parables truth, far from being given the day off, is up front and shouting in your face. There is no time for subtle shades, no space for nuances. To say that the Sheep and the Goats

is a parable is not to diminish the truth or the warning it contains: quite the opposite.

But take heart. The parable of the Sheep and the Goats is scary but its core message is extremely optimistic. We have a choice. What we do *matters*. Yes, yes, yes, we are all born reeking and filthy in the goat pen—and that explains the fear this parable can arouse- but we can choose to become sheep. Yes we can. It's an easy process: it's not like trying to transfer your mobile number, or get the bank to give you a mortgage, switch your gas supplier or feel relaxed in Croydon. Choosing the sheep track is not a difficult process. It's about what you do, not some crazed notion of God deciding everything before you even get started: you are not predestined to the goat pen.

Christ's brothers and sisters are not in short supply.

*“just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”*

Food and drink to those who need it. Clothes for the naked. Compassion for the sick and imprisoned and, the really difficult one for Brexit Britain, welcome strangers. There's the roadmap.

You will not be trying to muscle your way into an over-subscribed, crowded market. The one thing you can guarantee, is that once you start falling, people will be rushing to get out of your way. It is rare indeed for a hand to reach out to try to catch you. But it should be our hands.

How can we claim to be brothers and sisters of Christ the King, how can we deserve to be considered part of His royal family, if we will not catch those who fall? That is what God's love is about, not consigning you to Hell before you are born with no chance to change the sentence.

Being a sheep should mean something about how we are as individuals, but don't forget, sheep work best in flocks. In the twenty-first century this is how we can be

most effective, how we will most effectively promote Christ's Kingdom: agitating for justice, shouting for justice, demanding of those with influence and in power that together we build the sort of world Christ deserves. One voice crying in the wilderness is easy to ignore, but there is such a thing as society and together we roar. We have a vote. We can choose the businesses we support- by our money or custom- and which we don't. We can add our voices to those crying out for justice. These things can make change for the better.

Exercise your choice while you can. You don't have to be Mother Teresa to be a sheep and don't let anyone tell you, that you have to be a goat.