

“My wife doesn’t understand me!” Don’t worry, I’m not talking about *my* wife (ahem) but the the old classic moan husbands are meant to have used. Although probably not the reason Jesus stayed single, he was anyway often misunderstood. Not surprising, then, that it is sometimes hard to know today what he might have been getting at when, for example, he said that his followers had to hate their parents, spouse, children, siblings; or when he cursed a fig tree because it didn’t provide a snack for him.

Context, culture, history, even body language, carry non-verbal elements of whatever the real message is (then there’s intonation, too). The misunderstood husband could be a comic device or a real cry of anguish, depending on the circumstances. The same saying in a bygone age could even have implied that the wife is “only” a woman.

We all know that rumours around the villages often start by something repeated out of context - even before exaggeration takes over! Recently I heard it said that I had abandoned Midnight Mass because of some “incident.” In fact, I had paused a few minutes into the service to give the opportunity to a few young people to find seats and join what was a really good gathering to welcome in Christmas. So what ended up sounding like a confrontation was actually a welcome to people with whom I was glad to have shared that evening’s worship.

What hope of clarity, then, when we read snatches of teaching or reports of events two millennia ago? Of course, there are many things that don’t need much, if any, explanation: love God with all that you are, love your neighbour as yourself, God is love, no greater love has someone than they lay down their life for their friend. On the other hand: get behind me Satan, the last will be first, leave the dead to bury the dead, if your eye offends you then pluck it out; these are not particularly good ice-breakers at parties - but Jesus said them.

So my colleague, David Crombie, and I are going to talk about some of the difficult sayings of Jesus for our Lent sessions this year. Anyone is welcome to come along; no group sessions, no homework, just a bit of struggling with these words of Jesus which some Christians would rather put to one side. You can, of course, ask questions... See you on Thursdays (phone 738317 for location) at 18.00 for an hour from 18 February until 17 March. All you Irish can skip the last one!