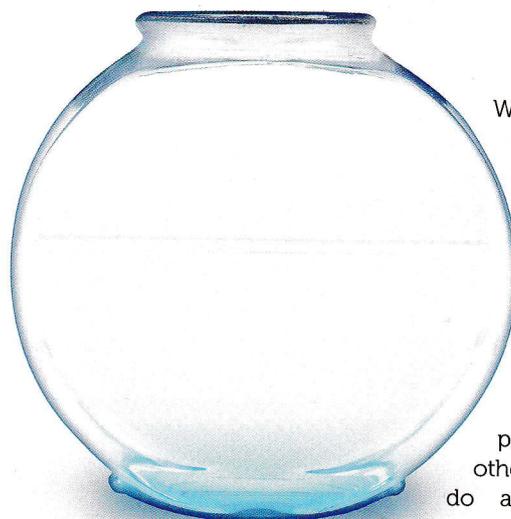


# There's *nothing* *wrong* with being ordinary



Many of us would describe ourselves as “just ordinary”, but what do we mean by that? **Clare O’Driscoll** considers the labels and expectations that can make us feel we’re not quite good enough

**O**ver 30 years on, I can still hear my teacher’s booming voice: “I’ve given you all C’s because you’re all average.” Something drained out of me. My ego perhaps. A bit of identity. The bit that knew English was my best subject and put my 11-year-old all into every piece of prose. It seemed the worst thing in the world to be told I was average.

“Nothing wrong with being average,” he barked, as if reading my mind, “Just means you’re normal. Anyone have a problem with that?”

Did I? It became an ongoing question mark which curled through my life, across the years. Are we average? Should we strive for more or just be grateful for normality? The Bible speaks of our uniqueness and originality, but in the

humdrum of life it doesn’t always feel true. Society is star-struck by success and, even in the church, there’s a pro-excellence ideal that can make you feel not-good-enough. Being “just ordinary” suddenly feels like failure.

So many things can make us feel too ordinary, from being overlooked at work or church to other people’s sweeping judgements. When my South African friend fell in love with an Englishman and moved here, her dad despaired. “You’re going to end up in a depressing semi-detached house in a road of identical houses.” “Maybe,” she replied, “but behind each house front are real people with unique stories.” In the same way, behind every person is a life of God-breathed uniqueness.

What’s wrong with ordinary anyway?

Well, nothing. And everything apparently. Look up ‘ordinary’ and a telling range of opinions creep out, from those who value it as a place where the extraordinary can emerge, to those who scowl at the dullness. Some people long to be extraordinary and are petrified of falling short; others feel too average to do anything worthwhile. The over-expectation of excellence and the under-expectation of mediocrity don’t blend into a happy medium. Both extremes cripple.

But is longing for the extraordinary a malady of our society, or a yearning put in our hearts by God? Mostly, my own questioning has come from a genuine desire not to sleepwalk through life missing God’s purposes. Sometimes, however, it comes from a slightly embarrassing craving for recognition.

Thomas Merton wrote about wrongly clothing himself with experiences and qualifications, wrapping them around himself as if he would be invisible, non-existent, without them. Are we sometimes tempted to do the same? It’s not wrong to achieve, but if we make it our identity we hide who we really are. Ironically ‘clothing’ ourselves with accomplishments to be more visible simply means our true self is buried beneath layers of noisy bragging.

Such noise can drown out the quieter ministries, like choosing an act of kindness over bombarding someone with ‘relevant’ advice. I had a friend at

university who could have won medals for her faith. She knew her Bible, led prayer groups and was 'Queen of Encouraging Notes in Pigeon Holes'. Yet I maintain that the most Christian thing she ever did was to walk with me across Southampton one cold November Friday when both the night and my heart were black. She had no idea how important it was, how I couldn't have lifted a foot without a friend by my side that evening.

Another friend, who has a heart for struggling mums, gets annoyed when Christians only volunteer if you mention the words "Bible study" or "evangelism". She complains: "What these

women need is a listening ear when they've had a rubbish week, but nobody's interested because it doesn't sound spiritual and it doesn't promise increased numbers."

We can mistakenly believe God's callings are like a high visibility jacket. But whilst there are upfront callings, there are many others too. Parenting is one; friendship and prayer are others. And so is just keeping on going. I had many years of this one and know it can feel like the worst kind of ordinary. But then people have since told me what my presence had meant for them at that time.

We have no idea what effect we have on others, walking alongside them in our daily lives. If you do ordinary things with great love, the Gospel turns them upside down and makes them extraordinary. And if you do extraordinary things without love, they will always lack something. Doing God's will is not always noisy and attention-grabbing. In fact, it is often when we are feeling ordinary and overlooked that we bear more fruit because, with genuine humility, God can work miracles.

By making achievement a god and pouring attention on celebrities, society

gives the impression that this is life's pinnacle. Has this attitude crept into the Church? We want our churches to be attractive to outsiders and we want to give God our best, but we also need to safeguard against showmanship. It is sold as "glorifying God with excellence", but what about those times when we don't feel very excellent? The sentiment is genuine, but there is a danger in the vocabulary that can make the less confident feel unworthy.

As an introvert growing up in the church I felt like a failure for not evangelising enough. But while I was 'failing', I brought

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all my friends to youth group and, in time, some of them ended up at church. Similarly, my friend's church prizes social justice. Crucial though this is, those who are unable to help for whatever reason (in her case, illness) are made to feel uncommitted. Meanwhile, this woman brings justice into countless people's lives by quietly but persistently standing up for them. Unseen. Another friend left church altogether for a while. She hadn't lost her faith. Not entirely. Her reason was simple: "I'm just tired of not feeling good enough."

The place where we're meant to come as we are, without needing to earn love, can be the very place where we feel least up to scratch. But God doesn't ask for excellence. He just asks for us. The most honest version of who we are. It involves dropping the church mask and peeling

off layers of false selves we didn't even know were there. Of course we should be our God-given best, but when things slip into image management the ground is ripe for unhealthy competition. When Paul talked of completing the race, I don't think he meant to beat everyone else in sight.

Maybe churches struggle with comparison too. Famous 'super-churches' can give the impression this is what everyone wants. Looking for a new church when I first moved to town, I stumbled across a quiet evening service. Fifteen or so people in a church lounge. In its ordinariness, the 'just-about-managing' music, the quiet unfolding of liturgy, I sensed something incredible: a reality, a genuine love for God. And I stayed.

We need to value it all: the spiritual and the mundane; the exquisite and the average. Because it is only when the ordinary is stripped away from us that we realise its worth. Anyone who's had a scrape with serious illness will tell you how precious the ordinary days are.

In her wisdom-packed book *Everyday God*, Paula Gooder encourages us to appreciate the spirituality of ordinariness because, without this, life becomes "...an impoverished waiting room, as we loiter between one big event and another". Similarly, we can find ourselves living only for future achievements which never quite satisfy. We look for relevance in the wrong places. The depth and quality of our lives are not measured by accomplishments, but by our relationship with God and others.

Equally though, God does not want us to be deadened by drudgery. Soul-destroying mundanity is not in his plan. But within the most humble circumstances there are opportunities for great love. As always, we can look to Jesus' example. Philippians 2 explains how he gave up his extraordinariness and became ordinary; nothing. And what if he hadn't? It is Jesus who teaches us to love ordinary and Jesus who draws us on to the extraordinary.

No one is ordinary in the end. And everyone is. But it's a special kind of ordinary. An ordinary that is full of the complexities of life, experience and love. We need to stop defining ourselves by what we do and to recognise that before all other identities, at our deepest place, we are God's. ■

+ Clare O'Driscoll is a language tutor and writer

