



Cannabis: what's the harm?

Let me state first up that the use of cannabis oil for cases of epilepsy, as with Billy Caldwell, is to be commended, and should be made legal straight away. It clearly works.

What's followed is a call from William Hague to make cannabis legal in general. And there's a sense in that: so many people use or have used cannabis, who essentially aren't criminals. Why is it illegal and, say, vodka isn't?

All fair points, and part of me wouldn't particularly oppose decriminalisation.

That doesn't, though, mean that I don't have serious problems with cannabis usage.

I didn't think like this when I was in my twenties. At that point, cannabis was all fine; its illegality was a historical quirk. It was a pleasant, generally beneficial drug, in my mind.

Twelve years after ordination, and I see the other side: the regular stream of people whose brains and thereby whose lives and personalities have been significantly screwed up by cannabis usage.

Take the teacher at the school where I was chaplain for a while. Let's call him John. John was a brilliant newly qualified teacher, caring for his students, clear in his subject, firm in his discipline; exactly the kind of person who you thought might be a head-teacher in the future.

One day, he came in to school convinced that the head-teacher and several other members of staff were in love with him; he even started taking his clothes off in the school chapel.

He had some skunk on the weekend, and for a few weeks before that. Not loads; he wasn't addicted; but for whatever reason, his brain was particularly susceptible to this kind of toxin.

The next day, he was sectioned. Recovery took months and in the end, he couldn't come back to full time teaching: it was just too much pressure. He wasn't a total drop out; he was able to make a slender living as a private tutor, but there is no question that his life was entirely derailed.

Then, at the more extreme, are the trickle of people who confide in me that they are, in fact, Jesus Christ on earth. The conversation comes up once every two years, when someone on the street spots my dog collar and feels the need to tell me about their true self. The demographics of these Messiahs has varied; the constant is that, as conversation develops, it turns out that they've all been regular users of weed.

90%, maybe 95% of people are fine with cannabis use; their brains don't get messed up. But there's a minority (and a big one) where it just causes a kind of meltdown, and picking up the pieces isn't the work of a day, or a month; it takes decades, and they will never fully recover.

June 2018. for the Train is a short column by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.