

Trinity 19 – A Sermon For Back to Church Sunday

Ezekiel 18 vv 1-4 p845, Ezekiel 18 vv 25- 32 p846, Philippians 2 vv 1-13 p1179, Matthew 21 vv 23-32 p989

Asked to preach on “Back to Church Sunday”, I asked myself why is it important that people should come back to Church? The cynical answer is that the Church of England cannot survive (at least in its present form) unless the people of England come back to Church, but that begs the question. Unless it is important that the people come back to the Church, it would not matter if the Church did not survive. So I asked myself why is the Church important to me? I hope the answers I came up with might be helpful to you.

I consider myself very blessed in that I was brought up as a Christian. As far back into my childhood as I can remember, both my parents said prayers with me when I was put to bed. Putting a child to bed is a very important expression of your love for your child. So is prayer. If parents love their children, they need to pray for them from the time they are born, to pray with them as they grow up, and, when they are old enough, to teach them to pray for themselves. There is nothing difficult about praying. It is just talking to God. You can tell Him anything in any words. If it helps you, you can read prayers written by other people, but there is no need to. You may like to kneel or to sit quietly or to stand, but what really matters is that, wherever you are, whatever words you use, whatever posture you adopt, you open yourself to God.

My grandmother taught me that I could pray anywhere because God is everywhere. Whatever problem, I might have to face, God would always be there and I only had to pray. She even taught me a song which some of you many know:

*A little talk with Jesus makes it right all, right,
A little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right,
In trials of every kind, praise God I always find,
That a little talk with Jesus makes it right, all right,*

The same grandmother also taught me a great deal of the Bible while I was still a young child. Not only is the Bible full of good stories; it teaches you how to cope with life. The Bible is a wonderful guide as to how to live your life. The Bible teaches you about God. Children ought to be brought up, not only to pray, but to know their bibles. Most bookshops sell bibles and there are some very good children’s bibles available especially from Christian bookshops and places like the gift shop at Aylesford Priory.

I don’t know if adults still do this for children (maybe not if they spend all their time indoors and go everywhere in the car) but in my childhood grown ups used to point out to me the wonders of nature, the beauty of the countryside, not only as things that are good in themselves, but also as testimonies to the glory of the God Who made everything that is. When I got older and more sophisticated, I learnt to see God in the city as well. You can deduce the existence of God from a single grain of sand. Well, there are millions of grains of sand in a concrete wall. Every human being is made in the image of God. So there are tens of thousands of reflections of God in the faces of the crowd at the Cup Final. (Incidentally, that is another reason why it is so terrible to see human faces disfigured by anger, malice or pain.)

So learn to pray always and everywhere. Know the Bible. Look for God in the world around you. Teach your children to do the same. But this is not enough. When I was a child, I was again blessed in that I was taken to Church and sent to Sunday School. Faith is a shared thing. If we are Christians, we are members of the Church, members of one another. Our personal prayer life, our understanding of the Bible, our recognition of God in the world around us, are sustained by our sharing with other people in public worship, by our membership of God's Church. In Sunday School, teachers and pupils learn together, extending what they learn of God in the family. In Church services, we pray together with other people in fellowship. Our faith is informed and sustained by the public reading of the Bible and by the sermon. God acts in our lives when we take part in the Sacraments – Baptism & Holy Communion. It is good to pray on your own, to study the Bible and to recognise the awesomeness of God in the natural world, but all these things are incomplete and insufficient if they are not done in the context of your belonging to God's Church.

Until I was nearly nine, I was taken by my mother to the family service once a month at St Nicholas' Church of England Church in Southfleet in the morning and by my grandmother to the evening service at the Congregational Church. So I was privileged to share with different congregations in two entirely different styles of worship with different theological emphases. When I was nine, we moved to Wigmore. At St Matthew's Church, I learnt the importance of Sunday Communion. Jesus told us to do this in remembrance of Him and Christian people, I believe, have a sacred duty to meet around the Lord's Table on the Lord's Day for the Lord's Supper. I was confirmed while I was at St Matthew's and so became a communicant member of the Church myself.

I also joined the youth club. Belonging to a church is about friendship, having fun together, being there for one another. And there is giving back. God has given us everything we have: our money, our possessions, our time, our talents, even our life itself. I had always been taught the biblical principle of tithing, the idea that we offer back to God a substantial proportion of what He gives us (say a tenth) of our money, our possessions, our time, our talents. We offer a generous proportion of what we have as a token that we offer our whole lives back to God *as a living sacrifice*. As a teenager, as part of giving back, I taught in Sunday School, which meant I had to attend the 8.00 Holy Communion service and I learnt something of the value of quiet contemplative worship. I also joined a Pentecostal youth club which gave me warm fellowship, a solid grounding in Scripture and the possibility of seeking gifts like speaking in tongues, gifts, which after much prayer, I decided were not for me.

I was very happy at St Matthew's, but, at 18, I left home and went to medical school in London. I went to the local church in W1 and it wasn't what I was used to. The services were different. I didn't know anyone. It would have been easy to drop out of church life, but, thank God, I didn't. I asked myself whether I really loved Jesus or the church of St Matthew, Wigmore? Well, I did love my old church, but, as I loved Jesus even more, I had to join the new one – even though it was not what I was used to and not entirely what I liked. As it happened, I got involved with a number of Christian groups in and around the medical school and the hospital, as well as visiting quite a few London churches of different

traditions and denominations. I learnt a lot from the sermons at All Souls, Langham Place, our parish church, and, in the hospital chapel, I began to discover the blessing of attending Holy Communion on weekdays in addition to Sundays. I developed a lot spiritually through experiencing new and different churches and Christian groups. Towards the end of my two years at the Middlesex Hospital, it became apparent that the doors to a medical career were closing, and a sense that I had always had, at least as a possibility, that God was calling me to ordained ministry became very strong. God does have plans for our lives and it is up to us to cooperate with Him. So, having consulted with very many Christian friends and been encouraged by the Church, I started a new course at a different college in Theology.

It was while I was at King's London, that my appreciation of Holy Communion truly deepened. I remember kneeling in St Paul's Church Herne Hill, almost overwhelmed by the implication of the words of the old prayer *that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us*. To think, the Son of God dwelling in me (and in you, if you too have faith in Him) and me (and you if you want) dwelling for ever in God. It is amazing.

It was also at King's, I think, that I came to appreciate the true nature of the Church. We are not a group of individuals who come once a week for our spiritual fix, to meet our Christian friends, to ask for God's help in some emergency, to have a good sing, to hear a sermon and to make our individual Communion. Coming to church once a week isn't like going down the pub. You know. You enjoy a couple of beers. You like the ambience. You meet your mates, chat up the bar maid. But perhaps the time comes when you get out of the habit of going to the pub. You grow out of wanting to drink a lot of alcohol. Your mates find another pub or a club to go to. You get married, have children, take a new job. You don't like the bands the new landlord hires. You object to the smoking ban. They start employing ugly barmaids. So you drift away from your local. But the Church is something different. If we are Christians, we are members of the Church, members of one another. We are sustained by our belonging and our faith will fade if we cut ourselves off from our fellow Christians and the worshipping community. The Church also needs us. We are each one unique. We all have different opportunities. We all have different talents. The Church is that much the worse off for every member who leaves. If we do not belong to a church, to the Church of God, we are letting ourselves down and we are letting God's Church down. I think we are even letting God down. There used to be a sign outside the church opposite Gillingham Bus Depot. *UR missing from this ch.ch.!* You see the point.

And finally, we have to appreciate that the church is not merely the church we go to, not merely the Church in Cuxton or Halling. All these little local churches are part of the worldwide church, with the diocese, with the Church of England, with the Anglican Communion, with churches of other denominations, with the church in every nation and the saints in Heaven. We are not to forget that they depend our fellowship and we depend on theirs.

It matters that the people of England come back to the Church because the Church needs the people and the people need God's Church.