

Drifting From God
A Sermon For Trinity 12
 (Isaiah 58 vv 9-14, Hebrews 12 vv 18-29, Luke 13 vv 10-17)

Richard Madeley recently wrote in the *Daily Express* that he believed that many of the problems we face in our country today are the result of our abandoning the Christian religion. He also said that he had never thought that he would say such a thing. I think that is significant. There have been many decent people in England in the last fifty or so years who have not acknowledged that decency is inextricably bound up with the question of what you believe about ultimate reality.

For what it is worth, I think Richard is right. Many of the problems we face as a society are indeed the result of our abandoning our Christian faith. But how did it happen? When did we decide that we didn't want to be Christians anymore?

I don't think that we ever did decide. We just drifted away from God. In the 1950s England was a complacently Christian country. Most people described themselves as C of E, unless they were quite definitely members of another Christian denomination. We have an established Church and our Head of State also enjoys titles such as Supreme Governor of the Church of England and Defender of the Faith. According to our coinage, the Queen holds her position *Deo Gratia*, by the Grace of God. Religious Education in state schools was teaching children the Christian faith. More than half of children went to Sunday School and most adults went to church at least sometimes. People joked about vehicular Christians who came just three times in their lives – in a pram, a wedding car and a hearse – but there was nothing unusual in coming to church every Sunday and quite a few people were “twicers” coming to both morning and evening services. We never made a collective decision, as a nation, that the Christian faith was a load of rubbish. We just drifted away from it. Harold Macmillan, Prime Minister from 1957-1963, said that we had never had it so good and he was right. We had won two World Wars and we were now at peace. There was no longer the grinding poverty of the interwar years or the Victorian Era. Not only had medicine made real progress in conquering diseases which had been killers for centuries; it was all free on the recently founded NHS! Perhaps people no longer felt that prayer was imperative. Increasing prosperity brought more leisure opportunities. In 1950 on a Sunday in Cuxton or Halling, the church and the pubs were the only things open, and they not at the same time, and there was nowhere else to go unless you were prepared to walk or throw yourself on the mercy of Sunday public transport services. I am not saying that in 1950 people came to church insincerely, but they lived in a world in which there were few other possibilities and it was normal to go to church. So they just came. By 1970, however, you might well have had a car and be able to go to the seaside or into town. More leisure opportunities were opening up even on Sundays. The Church had more rivals for your time than had formerly been the case. Unless you consciously believed that Church was more important than going to the beach, there was nothing to stop you from spending Sunday beside the sea.

In the Gospel, Jesus had to contend with pharisaic Jews who had turned their Sabbath into a burden rather than an opportunity, weighing people down with rules and restrictions, instead of opening up possibilities for worship and recreation. Too many Christians in England in the C19 & C20 did the same thing to the Christian Sunday, making it a miserable day when you couldn't have any fun. We have to face the fact that, for many people, being allowed to treat Sunday as an ordinary day has been a liberation!

Mid C20 English Christianity was a nice religion. We respected the right of other people to hold other views. We avoided religious controversy. We were quite happy to accept that you could be a Christian without coming to church, even that you could live a perfectly good Christian life without believing in Christian doctrine. Jesus was a great teacher and you could try to frame your life around the precepts He exemplified without believing that He was the Son of God. As the number of non-believing teachers and pupils grew in the 1960s, and as immigrants of other faiths became part of British society from the 1970s onwards, we played down the specifically Christian in school assemblies and religious education, believing it to be more important to build a united and harmonious community, than to pass on the dogmas and doctrines of Christianity to our own children and grandchildren.

The second half of C20 saw a good deal of change in the Church. We introduced new forms of service and we found ourselves forced to reconsider our own ethical beliefs in the face of rapid changes in the world at large: the effect of freely available contraception on sexual mores; the legalisation of abortion and homosexual behaviour; pressure to legalise euthanasia and so on and so forth. The Church herself became much less self-confident. Sometimes we were criticised for failing to make a stand for traditional values. Sometimes we were criticised for our inflexibility and our inability to change fast enough. Some people will tell you that the reason we suffered such a catastrophic decline in numbers in the second half of C20 was because we abandoned the traditional services which meant so much to so many people. Other people will tell you that we have failed to attract new people precisely because we are still far too traditional. I think there is something to be said on both sides of that argument! One point, which is sometimes overlooked, however, is the effect of all those debates in parishes in the 1960s and 70s about which services to put on. In one way these debates were a good thing. They involved ordinary churchgoers in the decision-making process and encouraged us all to think carefully about the words we use in our public worship and why we use them. On the other hand, however, these discussions about the services we hold in our churches undermined the givenness of the liturgy. We used to come to Church in order to worship God, generally speaking accepting the form of service our particular denomination offered and perhaps had offered since time immemorial, whenever that was! Having been through months of argument, however, in which we eventually agreed to compromise and have 1662 at 8.00 for the traditionalists, the occasional youth service for the young people, a Series 1,2 or 3 Parish Communion for the main body of the Church and monthly Mattins for the people who still liked that sort of thing, it was easy to start picking and choosing the services we attended, coming to church to please ourselves, rather than to please God, staying away from public worship if there was something which did not quite suit us. We might accept our Lord's words that He had chosen us, not we chosen Him, but

we thought that it was a matter of our choice whether we took part in public worship and, if so, how and when.

So we were living such easy lives that we did not feel the need to pray, there were plenty of things to do on Sundays other than go to Church and we did not want to impose our religious beliefs on other people. England was drifting away from the churches and church going was increasingly seen as a matter of personal choice rather than a sacred duty. Once that process got under way, it acquired a momentum of its own. Human beings are herd animals. We feel most comfortable doing what other people do. We don't like to stand out from the crowd. So, when it is no longer normal to go to church, even those who still do go to church every week start to question whether church-going is really necessary. When new people do decide to come to church, they feel lost as they are invited to join in what have now become unfamiliar words and rituals. The faithful few are discouraged by the very fact that they are so few and a small church does not have the resources to serve the community in the way that we would wish. Sunday is a day when children from broken homes go to their dads, a time when families who live in different parts of the country get together, a time to catch up on shopping and the chores we don't have time to do in the busy lives that we lead. A country in which fewer than 10% regularly attend church cannot hold the line against shops and other businesses opening for the other 90%, but once the shops are open, people who might otherwise be in Church get jobs in them or find it convenient to do their shopping. A vicar told me that he ran three children's services every Sunday, reaching more than 100 young people, till Sunday shopping was legalised, the mothers all got jobs in Tesco's and his family worship services collapsed.

People who arrange activities for boys and girls and for men and women on Sunday mornings are mostly not determinedly anti-Christian, trying to kill the Church in this country. They are ordinary decent people working to improve their community through such things as sports or youth movements or tidying up the environment. 95% of the people involved wouldn't have gone to church anyway. Does it matter if the 5% who might have gone to church do something else worthwhile instead? Does it matter enough to avoid Sunday mornings when planning the timetable of worthwhile social institutions? If Church is just one leisure activity – pleasant, mildly beneficial, but gradually fading away – why give it a specially privileged status and expect the voluntary organisations to arrange their activities so as not to clash with our worship services and Sunday Schools?

I think the answer is to be found in our OT lesson. In it God brings together such things as caring for the oppressed and abstaining from malice with observing the Sabbath if the Jews want to live in a just society and enjoy God's blessings. Sabbath is about taking time for God. Everything good about us derives from God. He gives us life. He gives us conscience. He comforts and sustains us. He teaches us the right way to live. He judges our failure to do so and provides the means of forgiveness. We are entirely dependent on God and we cannot survive as human beings unless we maintain our relationship with Him. Without God, we are very clever animals, providing marvellously for the satisfaction of both our needs and our desires, but we are not fully formed human beings. Without God we lack the divine spark which makes us different from animals. We are doomed to die and such life as we have is

incomplete, unsatisfactory and unfulfilling. You can't actually have the blessings of a Christian way of life unless you have faith in Jesus Christ, the God-Man, Who died on the Cross so that we may know God as our Saviour, our Friend and our Father, our God and our King, our Lord, our everything, so that knowing God we might have eternal life. Jesus said, *I am the Vine; you are the branches*. If branches are cut off from the vine, they wither and die and that is what happens to human beings when they are cut off from God. So Richard Madeley is right. Many of the problems we face in our society are the result of our abandoning our Christian belief. We thought we could be Christians without belonging to the Church, but we couldn't and we can't. If we haven't got time for God we forfeit our eternity.

But how can we recover? How can we swim against what appears to be the tide of history, the decline of the Church in western Europe? The answer lies in our New Testament reading from Hebrews. What we have as Christians is more wonderful than anything that any other religion can offer. It is more wonderful than all the things that secular culture offers – consumer goods, fantastic holidays, designer clothes, more than enough to eat. What we have as Christians is the ineffable privilege of entering into the presence of God. Hebrews speaks of Heaven, the angels, the spirits of fellow Christians already in the fullness of His presence. He speaks of the reality of God our Judge and Jesus our Saviour. We come into that astonishing Presence. Two things follow. The first is that this is a Kingdom which cannot be shaken. The Church's guarantor is God Himself. That's why we sing

*Gates of Hell shall never 'gainst that Church prevail,
We have Christ's own promise and that cannot fail.*

The Church's continued existence, its growth and its mission, do not depend on us. They depend on God. This is the promise.

There is, however, also a warning in this wonderful passage and that is its second point. To be a Christian is an amazing privilege. When you think about it, it is astonishing that God invites us mortal, sinful creatures into His Presence, that He speaks to us through the Bible, that He nourishes us with the Body and Blood of His Son, that He hears and answers our prayers, that He has prepared for us a place in Heaven, with joys which are beyond our understanding. This is so amazing, but it contains a warning. You can't mess about with God. *Our God is a consuming fire*. Our membership of God's Church is much more than pleasant and mildly beneficial. It is how we relate to a consuming fire. You can't mess about with God. Church is not just one thing among many, a pleasant way to pass the time on Sunday, a nice place to meet nice people and maybe to do a bit of good in the community. What is required of us is such a love for God, for the Church and for the world, that we are utterly different from the people we might have been had we not been Christians. Faith is not a hobby which may be allowed to lapse when we grow bored or get too busy for it or it becomes unfashionable. Our love is to be God's love, an all consuming love which passionately sacrifices self for the salvation of humanity. Such Christians may be confident that in this world they are working with God and therefore must prevail and that God Himself is their eternal inheritance.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.