

Trinity 14 2013- Why Bother With Back to Church Sunday?

Ecclesiastes 10 vv 12-18 p676, Ps 112, Hebrews 13 vv 1-16 p1211, Luke 14 vv 1-14 p1047

The 29th September this year is *Back to Church Sunday*, but why bother? I've put up some posters and I've got some invitation cards for you to take today or in the next week or two. The idea is that you tear them in half. On one half you write which service on 29th you're inviting someone to and give it to them as an invitation. On the other half you write their name and keep it as a reminder to pray for them yourself. It would be a good idea to start by praying for guidance as to whom you should invite. But why bother? It's embarrassing asking people to come to church. And anyway they know where it is and they can quite easily find out what time the services are. If they wanted to come to church, there's nothing stopping them. However, *Back to Church Sunday* has had quite a lot of success in recent years in bringing people into church, just not in this parish. Some have come just for that Sunday in other places but quite a lot have stayed on and come back. Why don't we make more of this opportunity in Cuxton and Halling? But why bother? The obvious answer is that the Church in England generally has been in numerical decline for decades. If we don't get some more people, we'll have to close church buildings and perhaps withdraw from any meaningful ministry in large parts of the country. But would that matter? When the lace making group, which met in the church hall, declined to the point that there were only a few members and they mainly elderly, it stopped meeting. Likewise *Floral Art*. We're always sad to see the closure of something that was once good and which a lot of people enjoyed, but, realistically, if there are no longer sufficient numbers of active people interested in making lace or arranging flowers to sustain the meetings, then surely it makes sense to close. Isn't it the same for the Church? If there aren't enough active people to sustain churches, doesn't it make sense for them to close too?

They won't pull down St Michael's or St John's. They'll find a new use for them or some government body will maintain them. Jesus didn't come to found a historic building preservation society. Building and maintaining beautiful buildings has only ever been a sideline for Christians and if there aren't many Christians around, the nation will just have to rely on the National Trust or English Heritage to preserve these testaments to what we formerly believed. It's not likely that listed buildings will be allowed to be demolished and, if that is all they are – heritage – they might as well be handed over to some official conservation corporation. It is true that a significant proportion of the population still look to the church for weddings, christenings and funerals, but, if they're not interested the rest of the time, would it really make much difference to their lives if the churches were closed? If it would presumably, they'd support them more. There are secular naming ceremonies provided by local authorities. There are lots of attractive wedding venues other than churches and many of them can provide the reception and accommodation for the guests as part of the same package as the ceremony. There are humanist funerals available as an increasingly popular alternative to a religious service. You can have it both ways. Dode church will offer you a civil marriage in a historic ecclesiastical building. They'll charge you twice as much as we do. If a wedding is just a commercial opportunity you can charge whatever the market will bear, but that is hardly justification for keeping open St Michael's and St John's.

It is also true that it seems to be good for people to go to church. Churchgoers on average live longer, healthier lives and have more friends than non-churchgoers, but, if people don't realise that, or they don't care about it enough to go to church themselves, that is insufficient justification for keeping churches open. Religious people are also more likely than those who are not religious to be involved in charity work and voluntary work in the community than the non-religious. But there is no reason why more atheists and agnostics shouldn't be involved in charity work. Plenty are and more could be. Many of the things which the Church used to provide – poor relief, medical care, education, etc. – are now provided by the state or by other voluntary bodies, although there is a possibly temporary increase in demand for charities as a result of recent cuts in public spending.

So why would it matter if all the churches closed? So long as enough of you in Cuxton and Halling enjoy coming to church to maintain the buildings, pay a rector and pay your quota to the diocese, we'll continue much as we are now. If a time comes when the congregations are too few, too elderly and too poor to maintain our current provision, we'll cut back and cut back until there is nothing left to cut, and then we'll close just like the lace making group and *Floral Art*. But would it matter? My predecessor Graham Lacey forty years ago asked an audience in the scout hall that very question. He pointed out that if people didn't support St Michael's it would close. "So what?" was the response from one young man. So what, indeed. I wonder if that young man is now a middle-aged man occupying one of these pews?

In the biblical Book of Esther, after a lot of rigmarole which I won't go into here, a young Jewish lady becomes Empress of Persia. One of the Persian ministers, Haman, takes against the Jews and decides that the whole Jewish race ought to be exterminated. Hitler was by no means the first to plan genocide against the Jews. The queen's uncle Mordecai tells her that she must use her position to protect her people. Naturally Esther is afraid that if she interferes and tries to do anything, she too will be for the chop. Mordecai warns Esther that keeping quiet won't save her. He also points out, *If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?* Oddly enough, the Book of Esther never mentions God. It's the only biblical book which doesn't. The conviction, however, is that behind the scenes God is in charge. He will not let His people perish. Esther has been given the opportunity to be instrumental in saving the people of God. If she declines the opportunity, God will save them some other way. That is just how things are. It is a necessity that the people of God should not perish and we are the people of God. You and I have the opportunity to be instrumental in achieving God's purposes for His Church in the world today. If we let Him down, that won't mean that God will fail. It will just mean that we have failed and we shall not share in His victory. But it doesn't have to be like that. He has given us His Holy Spirit and we can do the good works He has prepared for us to walk in, whatever the setbacks and how ever inadequate we may feel.

So why must the Church continue on earth until the end of time and why will God make sure that it does? Whether you agree with me on this point or not will depend on whether you fully accept the Christian analysis of reality, the way things are. If we are correct, everything

depends on God. God made everything that there is. Everything is sustained by the power of God. If God for one moment stopped caring about anything that exists, that thing God stopped caring about would simply cease to exist. Everything depends on God in every sense of the word *depend*. There is no existence, no reality, apart from God. The world simply cannot exist without God. If you don't believe that, you don't really believe in God. But, don't worry about it. God is beyond our understanding and therefore beyond our comprehension. *Lord I believe. Help thou mine unbelief.*

Of all the wonderful things which God has made, human beings are the most wonderful. More wonderful than stars and planets, more wonderful than atoms and the subatomic particles that comprise them, more wonderful than time and space and energy and matter, more wonderful than all other forms of life, a little lower than the angels, human beings are made in the image of God. We are made to be His children. He breathes into us His Spirit. He loves us so much that He sends His Son to die for us. Eucharistic Prayer G in Common Worship calls us *the crown of all creation*. I wonder how we dare to say such a thing and yet it is true. We are *the crown of all creation*. We pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us, Our Father – astonishing, amazing, but true.

God is all powerful and all good. God is all knowing. God is love. So how come that there is so much trouble in the world which He has made and which He sustains? The answer is that necessarily perfect love must permit freedom. How ever loving and protective you parents may be, as your children grow up, you have to give them their freedom if they are ever to fulfil their potential as people. You eventually have to risk their making foolish mistakes, running into danger or actively deciding to do what they know is wrong. God has included freedom in His gifts to His Creation – notably to His human creation. The evil in the universe can be explained by the fact that God takes a step back from His Creation. God takes a step back to allow us room in which to walk and run. We can only fulfil our potential as beings made in the image of the Source of all Being if He sets us free, free to choose, to love because we want to, not because we have to.

The younger son becomes the prodigal son. He takes his inheritance and wastes it on riotous living. When he comes to himself, he finds that his father is waiting for him. The shepherd searches out the lost sheep. The woman hunts down her missing coin. God never stops loving us no matter how far we have strayed or what we have done. He sends Jesus into a lost world – a world which has lost itself by its own folly and downright wickedness. He sends Jesus to overcome all the power of evil by sacrificing Himself in love – Son of God and Son of Man, nailed to a cross to bring us home, to redeem the whole of creation, to sanctify a universe hitherto alienated from the Creator without whom it cannot even exist. As firstfruits of the harvest, God calls His Church out of the world. We are the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are now the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the leaven (or yeast) to leaven the whole lump, to raise wet flour into bread. The Church cannot die. She is the Creation of God and she has Christ's work to complete – to counter all the power of the Evil One, to redeem the cosmos. The only question for us is the one with which Mordecai confronted Esther. Do we want to be part of God's plan to save His people or are we willing to miss out on His final salvation?