

**“WE’VE STOPPED GOING TO CHURCH – AND THAT’S GOOD!”**

***1 Peter 2:4-12***

This second lockdown seems to have caused a good deal more discussion about the fact that we are currently unable to meet together in our church buildings. Just as we were starting to make plans about gradually getting together again, the new measures have meant we’ve had to suspend our plans again for a bit. In some quarters that has led to people talking about “banning” worship and attempts to liken our situation to that of persecuted believers in other parts of the world. There’s been talk of state control and suppression of Christianity. Others have seen it as a welcome opportunity to reassess what church is all about and re-think things within the context of a very different reality from the one we have been used to. But it’s still the case that many of us – the majority, perhaps – are missing “going to church”. (Although I noticed last week that only one person who spoke at the Ignite service was looking forward to being able to worship together again.)

But that’s what we do, isn’t it? We “go to” things – things we like doing, or things that are part of our duty, or things that others drag us along to. We go somewhere, at a particular time, to do a particular thing. We go to church on Sunday mornings at 9 o’clock or 11 o’clock. It’s part of our weekly routine. The author Ronald Blythe (who published that book *Akenfield*, which was briefly popular in the 70s) once wrote, “*As for the British churchman, he goes to church as he goes to the bathroom, with the minimum of fuss and with no explanation if he can help it.*”

Now, we might say that’s fine. Going to church should be as integral to our *weekly* routine as going to the bathroom is to our *daily* routine. But I want to say something different this morning. I want us to celebrate that we’ve stopped going to church. (Don’t switch off in disgust: hear me out.)

When we use that phrase – “going to church” – we are locating “church” in a temporal and spatial reality. We are saying that church is something you go to in a specific place at a specific time – just as we go to the restaurant or to a football match, or to Waitrose for that matter. It thus becomes just another compartment in our lives like all the other compartments. It’s about a building, about a place, about an occasion – somewhere to do things in or at or to.

And once “going to church” becomes no more than another compartment in our lives, we’ve lost the plot, really, we have lost sight of what it is all about. Church is not something we go to. It’s not simply another place in the routine geography of our lives. It is not simply another engagement on our calendars. It is not simply another duty in our handbook of civic or religious responsibilities. To talk of “going to church” is to miss out on most of what the New Testament is about. It is to miss out on the excitement, the commitment, the joy, the reality of what being a follower of Christ

is all about. We need to change the verb, to find a new way of talking about it – for if we do not, then “going to church” is unlikely to have any more effect on our lives and on our community than does going to the supermarket or going to the doctor. In fact, it may probably have even less effect. And it will certainly not be very helpful in our trying to get people to understand what Christianity is all about – and will confuse and distract us if we keep moaning about not being able to “go to” Wade Street Church.

Some people talk about “having church”. Other people talk about “fellowshipping” together. Others have different ways of expressing what they think is going on. Apart from the grievous injury that phrases such as “fellowshipping” do to the English language (its advocates say that it’s a verb in Greek: fair enough, but it’s not a verb in English, so don’t try to make it one), “church” is still being treated as an object to do things to. It is limiting, confining, domesticating. It means that we are in control and we can turn it on and off at will, we can go when we want and leave when we want. When I first came here the prayer meeting was advertised with the words, “*Come when you can: leave when you must.*” That’s not what the church is all about – this one or any other one.

If we are serious about following Jesus Christ – and that’s what we’re trying to signify by using his name for ourselves as “Christ-ians” – then we need to take a fresh look at what church is all about. [And let’s not forget that Jesus himself is recorded as using the word only three times in the gospels – all in Matthew’s gospel. He uses it twice in *18:17* when he’s talking really about being thrown out of the church. And he uses it in *16:18* in that verse that we Protestants find so difficult to cope with where he tells Peter that he will be the rock on which the church is built.]

I want to suggest to you this morning that now we’ve had to pause “going to church” we can start to think about “being the church”. That’s really what it’s all about – about **being** the church, living it out every hour of every day wherever we are. You and I – Christ-ians – are to be the church wherever we are. We are to be a Christian presence in every situation. When people talk about establishing a Christian presence in a part of Lichfield or wherever, where there is no church at present, or ask where the Christian presence will be on some new development, meaning, “Where’s the identifiable church building?”, they have got it wrong. There already is a presence in every part of Lichfield: it’s anywhere there are Christians living – the church is in Walsall Road and Lynfield Road and Bracken Close and Blakeman Way and Broad Lane and all those other places where you live. Unless any new development turns out to be a gross statistical anomaly, there will be a Christian presence there, too, once people start to move in. The church is there because there people are “being” the church.

Yes, I know that we need church buildings in which we can meet to help and encourage one another, in which we can offer our corporate worship to God (and if you want to reflect a bit more on that, then look at the sermon I preached when we came back together at the beginning of October: it's on the church website, "*Being Church*" No.671: it's the other side of the coin), but if we reduce the church to nothing more than a building, we reduce it to nothing any more. When we do "go to church" for an hour or so each week it is so that we are better able and better equipped to "be" the church for the other one hundred and sixty six and a half hours. Mother Theresa once said about her work and the balance within it between what we are calling "going to" church and "being" the church, "*First we meditate on Jesus, and then we go out and look for him in disguise.*" "Going to" church can become a sterile and pointless exercise unless it really inspires us to get out and share the good news of Jesus through "being" the church. Another Catholic writer, Father Andrew, says: "*There is little good in filling our churches with people who go out exactly the same as they go in; the call of Christ is not to fill churches but to fill heaven.*"

That apostle whom Jesus predicted would form the bedrock of his church went on to do some amazing things – among which was writing two letters which have found their way into our Bibles. That was pretty amazing because Peter was, as far as we know, a fairly unschooled fisherman, not a literary or theological whiz kid. Unlike many of the other letters in the New Testament which were written to the Christians who formed the church in a particular place – Ephesus, Colosse, Philippi and so on – Peter wrote to the followers of Christ who were scattered throughout the region, being the church. And what he wrote to these scattered "*strangers in the world*" is all about "being" the church in a world which is, let's face it, not always terribly friendly towards those who call themselves Christians.

But he called them "*God's elect*" and stressed that they were people who had been "chosen" (1:1,2). They were people who had been, as the Greek word for "church" – *ecclesia* – suggests, "called out", selected from the world around for a particular task. He actually lays that on a bit thicker in the verses we've just read: look at 2:9 - "*You are a **chosen** people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a **people belonging to God** ...*" You and I have been chosen by God, we have heard and responded to a call from him to live out in our lives the values of the Kingdom of God and to look forward to the eternal future with hope and assurance.

That's great! It's a real cause for rejoicing and for thanksgiving to God. But there's a reason for this, says Peter. It's so that, as the *New Living Translation* puts it, "*you can show others the goodness of God.*" Now, by and large, those "*others*" are not to be found in a church building at 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings – nor, indeed, at any other time of the week. They are to be found next to you at work, in the house next door, across the table in the pub, along the aisle in the

supermarket, around the gate at the end of school. If you and I are going to “*show others the goodness of God*” we will have to wait a very long time to be able to do it here in this building or any other church building. That’s why the church is “*scattered*”, not, in this case, “*through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia*” but through North Lichfield, Boley Park, Darwin Park, Kings Bromley, Whittington and beyond. That’s where you and I are to be the church.

In choosing you, God has touched your life, he has effected some kind of change in you – however slowly, however dramatically – and he wants you to share it with others by the way you live, by the way you respond to others’ needs, by the things that you say. It is an immense privilege. God’s at work in all kinds of ways beyond these four walls and he really wants you to be involved. Philip Yancey puts it like this: “*The reign of God is breaking into the world, and we can be its heralds.*” Good, eh? Get out there and be the church!

Now, we may be “*scattered*” about all over the place – one of us in this club, another in that school, another in that road, another in this village – and we may feel a bit isolated if we look at it in those terms. But Peter says that we can only “be” the church with the help of each other. He talks about the followers of Christ as a “*people*” in *v10a*, a people that once were disparate and without identity. But now, you’ve been called together, you’ve been given a task, you’ve been given a future, you’ve been given the resources, you’ve been given a name – “*the people of God*”, the church. The image that he uses in this part of his letter is that of a “*spiritual house*” which is made up of “*living stones*”. We’ve got the cornerstone of Jesus Christ to give us our levels, to keep us going the right way, but we’re being built up together. That’s why we do need fellowship, why we do need to come together regularly, why we do need each other’s encouragement and each other’s support. That’s what being the church is based on. But the building that is really important isn’t a rather nice example of Georgian non-conformist architecture, nor a mediaeval parish church, nor a stainless steel and glass cathedral. The important building is that “*spiritual house*”, the church where it is obvious God is alive and working, the people of God “being” the church in every part of the community. That is what is so distinctive about the Christian church.

You see, once you start taking it really seriously, you see that this is a radical idea. Once you stop “going to” church and start “being” the church you subvert people’s notions of what the church is all about. You stop thinking like all those people who think that “going to” church is what matters and they can do that on Christmas Eve or Easter Sunday, or for the odd christening or funeral or wedding, and say “I go to church” in the hope that they might just scrape in where it matters when the last trumpet sounds. You become the “*aliens and strangers*” that Peter writes about here in *v11*. Notice that he doesn’t attempt to unpack what he means by that phrase. It’s taken for granted

that those who try to “be” the church in the world will stand out, will have values and standards and aspirations and goals that are different from those around them.

Unfortunately, once you start talking about “going to church” and stuff it away in that little “11 o’clock on Sunday morning down there in Wade Street” compartment and believe that’s all it takes to be a Christian, you don’t worry too much about the rest of the week, either. It doesn’t really matter then. You have “been to” church and done your duty: you don’t need to “be” the church the rest of the time, and so you become just a part of the world at large, you accommodate yourself to its values – not Christ’s; you adopt its priorities – not Christ’s; you seek its goals – not Christ’s. And we even end up doing it together as a church. So desperate are we to get people into church, to “go to” church, that we adapt what we are doing here to try and be more “relevant”, to replicate what’s going on around so that people will flock in and, so the logic goes, be so challenged by what’s going on here that they’ll accept Christ as their Saviour. The truth is that if what happens in here is so much like the world outside because we’ve tried so hard to be “relevant”, then it won’t be distinctive enough to challenge them anyway. G K Chesterton, as always, put it rather well when he said, *“We do not want, as the newspapers say, a church that will move with the world. We want a church that will move the world.”*

Now, of course, what we do and say here on Sundays has to be able to touch people’s lives in ways which they can fully appreciate. We need some points of contact with the world around or we become either a ghetto or a museum. But you and I are far better able to do that through the networks and relationships that we are part of during the week. By all means bring your friends into church on Sundays, when that’s possible again – but to do that you need some friends to bring! Out there, in your neighbourhoods, schools, community groups, associations and societies, you are to “be” the church, to be a couple of hundred or so signposts of hope in a desperate and confused world. You are to be out there saying to people, “Look, there’s a different way to cope with life, and it’s a better way” – and showing them by your lives what that better way is. Good old Karl Barth hid some wonderful nuggets of truth in the thousands of pages of his *Church Dogmatics*. Here’s one of them: *“[The Church] exists ... to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to [the world’s] own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise.”*

“Being” the church means that you and I are to be those signposts, to be the means of incarnating Christ in our world. You and I are to live out our discipleship in ways which cause people to say, “Now that seems to make sense. There must be something to that.” Or, as Peter puts it, *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”* You are the heralds of Christ, as Philip Yancey wrote. Back in the 1980s, the martyred South American priest, Oscar Romero, told his people that

they should not fear the closure of the Christian radio stations by the American backed right-wing regime in El Salvador, because each one of them was a microphone for God. They were there to speak for him, to live for him, to make a difference for him.

*“I repeat what I told you once before when we feared we might be left without a radio station: God’s best microphone is Christ and Christ’s best microphone is the Church, and the Church is all of you. Let each one of you, in your job, in your own vocation – nun, married person, bishop, priest, high school or university student, workman, labourer, market woman – each one in your own place live the faith intensely and feel that in your surroundings you are a true microphone of our Lord.”*

Another priest, the English priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his poem *As kingfishers catch fire* wrote:

*“for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
to the Father through the features of men’s faces.”*

It’s a bit like the old saying about “*Christ has no hands but our hands ...*” This place is not the church. 9 o’clock, 11 o’clock on Sunday morning isn’t the church. You are the church. Don’t go to it – be it! Be it now, when people really need the hope and joy that the followers of Jesus should be able to demonstrate in their lives. You and I are called to be the church through living consistent, holy lives – lives that will speak to those around us of God’s goodness and will motivate them to call out to him. We need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, inspired by Jesus Christ and given hope in God. Pray that he will indeed work in us and through us wherever we find ourselves to the glory of his holy name.

### **Questions for discussion**

- 1) First, discuss your initial reactions to the sermon.
- 2) In what ways should Christians be distinct from those around them?
- 3) In what ways could the church change to have more contact with the community around it?
- 4) How can we support each other as we try to **be** the church in our daily situations?
- 5) What’s the point of “going to church”?
- 6) What are the things over which Christians should not compromise to suit modern thinking?