

Part of the Family

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 13th March 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Informal Parish Communion)

Readings: Acts 2:37-47, Mark 3:31-35

[Not from the Lectionary]

Introduction: Do I need to go to church?

Discuss this question with one or two others, or consider on your own:

In the light of the reading from Acts 2:37-47, what would you say to someone who said to you, “I don’t need to go to church to be a Christian”? (You can find the reading on page 1094 in the pew Bibles).

Whether this is true or not depends on what you mean by a Christian and what you mean by “Church”. Is Church an institution or a community?

In the passage from Acts, we get a glimpse of the beginnings of the Christian Church. It’s a group of people who share a belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and who want to grow in their knowledge of his teachings, and who share a sense of belonging to a community of others who share their faith.

A little Church history

Like all movements, as the number of believers grew there was a need for some degree of organisation. The apostles who had been with Jesus were accepted as the leaders, and in due course other leaders were appointed. Believers met

together in their homes as well as attending the Temple and synagogues. Over time, as the church spread throughout the Roman Empire, the church embraced those who were not Jewish, and people from a wide range of social and religious backgrounds. There was a need to regulate the way local church congregations operated, to make sure that wrong ideas didn't get taught, and that there was no abuse of power by influential people. Over the centuries the church became more bureaucratic and hierarchical, and in many countries it came to be seen as the religious arm of the State.

Nowadays we take it for granted that going to church is entirely voluntary. But it has not always been so. In England under Edward VI a law was passed that made church attendance compulsory, and during the reign of Elizabeth I a fine of one shilling was introduced (quite a sum in those days). Churchwardens were responsible for enforcing the law. I can't see today's churchwardens being very keen on doing this!

In 1689 the Toleration Act was passed under William and Mary, giving permission for Christians who belonged to non-Conformist churches not to attend Church of England services¹. The Toleration Act was also used as an excuse by others who didn't want to attend church. You may find this hard to believe, but it wasn't until 1969 that the Statute Law

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Toleration-Act-Great-Britain-1689>

(Repeals) Act repealed all legislation obliging people to attend church.²

Inner motivation

All of which sounds ridiculous to our minds. Jesus never tried to force anyone to follow him, or to attend the synagogue, as we saw last week in the story of the rich young ruler who went away sad because he wasn't prepared to make the commitment that Jesus was asking of him. And besides, forcing people to attend church services is never going to turn them into "heart and soul" disciples.

Being a Christian involves coming to know the love of God for yourself, and choosing to respond to it in trust and obedience. How we live out our faith, including attending worship, comes from our inner motivation to know God better and to follow Jesus day by day. The church is not fundamentally an institution or an arm of the State, but the fellowship of those who believe in Jesus and want to follow him. And one of the models that help us to understand the nature of the Church is the idea of *family*. So let's listen to something Jesus said about family.

Gospel reading: Mark 3:31-35

I guess a lot of people may be a little shocked by Jesus' response on hearing that his family were outside asking for him. As a bit of background, a few verses earlier Mark tells us that Jesus' mother and brothers heard rumours that "he

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<https://www.thefreelibrary.com/A+shilling+for+Queen+Elizabeth%3A+the+era+of+state+regulation+of+church...-a0182273021>

has gone out of his mind” and came seeking to “restrain” him³. Jesus’ family are clearly concerned about him. I suppose it was a big adjustment for them to accept his change of career from village carpenter to itinerant preacher. He’s surrounded by crowds of people, and they think it’s all too much for him. John’s Gospel says that Jesus’ brothers didn’t believe in him.⁴ Here in Mark it appears that Jesus’ family are much less on board with his mission than his followers are, whom he describes as his “brother and sister and mother”. Jesus is saying that he regards those who are sitting around him, listening to his teaching because they want to do the will of God, as his family⁵.

What does “family” mean?

So let’s take a few minutes to think about the meaning of “family”.

In a biological family, people have a shared origin, and share the common experiences of life together, such as growing up, living in a particular place, being dependent on other members of the family, or helping others out of a sense of family loyalty. And, of course, family includes grandparents and grandchildren, aunts, uncles and cousins, not just parents and their children. The phrase “blood is thicker than water” means that family ties are stronger than any other ties between people. But is this really true?

The same sense of belonging, shared values and experiences and mutual loyalty can also be found in other groups to

³ Mark 3:20-21

⁴ John 7:3-5

⁵ Mark 3:34-35

which we belong. George is a member of a WhatsApp group of colleagues and former colleagues in her training department at Frimley Park Hospital. The group has called itself “Frimley Family”. Another example is the armed services, where working together and supporting each other in the face of hardship and danger brings a very strong sense of connection. In past generations the word used was “comrades”, but today’s soldiers often describe their fellow-soldiers as family. And the British Army website says of those who leave the service, *“No matter the length of your service, you’ll always be a part of the British Army family.”*⁶

Some people have little or no biological family, or the family they have live far away and are not much in contact. So for them another group, such as a club or the church community they belong to, becomes their family.

In the New Testament letters, the words “brothers and sisters” are frequently used to describe fellow-believers⁷. The theological reason for this simple: Jesus invited his followers to think of God as their loving heavenly Father, who knows us and listens to us when we pray, and will provide for us⁸. If we all have the same Father, then we are by definition brothers and sisters.

Of course, within the church family, some relationships will be closer than others. People who serve together, for

⁶ <https://www.army.mod.uk/people/leave-well/> accessed on 12/3/2022

⁷ For a small selection of examples, see Romans 1:13, 7:1, 12:1, 16:14, 1 Corinthians 1:26, 16:20, 1 Thessalonians 1:4, Hebrews 3:1, James 1:2, 1 Peter 5:9, 1 John 3:17

⁸ See Matthew 5:45, 6:6,9,32, 18:14, Mark 11:25, John 20:17

example members of the church choir, and people who belong to a house group, may feel a particularly strong bond. There is also the relationship of godparents and godchildren, who are connected through baptism. There are mentoring relationships of various kinds, and the close relationships that can develop through pastoral care.

It's also true that just as people within a human family don't always see eye-to-eye, but have to exercise patience, forgiveness and self-sacrifice, so also we can't expect everyone in our church to see things the same way as us. We all need to exercise respect, understanding and self-sacrifice in our dealings with each other, and be prepared to give a little ground for the good of the whole community.⁹ Not always easy when people feel passionately about things!

Part of the family

So how does this idea of the church as a family help us to answer the question I posed at the beginning: Do we need to go to church to be Christians?

Well, clearly the most important reason to attend a church service is to worship God. But it's also a way of sharing in the life of the Christian community. We come both to give and to receive – to God and from God but also to others and from others.

I mentioned a moment ago people whose family members live a long distance away, and who have little contact with them. They're still family, and sometimes they may get in touch, for example through a Christmas card or when there's

⁹ See Romans 12:9-21

a family funeral. In the same way, individual Christians who rarely if ever attend a gathering of other Christians, such as a Sunday worship service, are still part of the family. But they are missing out on the fellowship, the mutual support and encouragement, that the life of the Church offers. And they're not doing much to contribute to the life of the family either.

Just as God made human beings to be social creatures, sharing our lives together, depending on each other and growing through our relationships with each other, so he intended the followers of Jesus to share their lives with each other, just as we heard was happening in the early church in Jerusalem in our reading from Acts.

And we should also not forget that our brothers and sisters in other places, near or far, are also members of our spiritual family. We should care about the plight of Christians who are suffering in other parts of the world, whether through persecution, through poverty or through war. As we pray for the people of Ukraine, we should particularly remember those who are trying to live out their faith in difficult circumstances, bringing the love of God to their fellow Ukrainians through practical acts of kindness or words of hope. We need to pray that church leaders can bring a distinctive Christian perspective to the war.

Conclusion

So to sum up, being a Christian isn't just about your relationship with God. We are also members of God's family, the Church.

What about you? Do you see the church as an institution, or as a charity that needs our support? Or do you see it as God's family?

Instead of asking ourselves, "Do I need to go to church to be a Christian?", perhaps we should ask, What does it mean to me to be a member of this local part of God's family at St Michael's? What does it mean to me to have brothers and sisters in other churches in Sandhurst, and in the rest of the world? What part am I willing to play in God's family?