



26TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You may have heard on the news recently that the Church of England has decided to call this Sunday 'Back to Church Sunday'. It's part of a national initiative to encourage people who have lapsed from going to church, or those who have never been at all, to start coming with one of their friends or family members. I listened to a 'Podcast' on the Church of England's website, in which a priest was telling people that they should come back to church because they were special and would find such a warm welcome that it would make them feel like they were the most important person in the world. I couldn't help raising an eyebrow at this assertion, and wondering at exactly how many churches up and down the country would this wonderfully warm welcome be found. Not, I imagine, as many as that priest would like to think. I then wondered whether or not that warm welcome could be ensured here at S. Paul's.

While I don't personally go in for these national initiatives and gimmicks, I think there is a serious point here: the Church has recognised that we are now in a position where the mission of the Church is so vital that we need to engage with our local communities, our families and our friends in spreading the Gospel message in a society, and to a generation, that has completely forgotten what it means to be Christian, or has never heard the Gospel message. I think that there are many reasons for this, but I think that one of them is that the people of this country find what the Church says very difficult to accept, when she speaks with so many voices, and with very different opinions on many subjects. People, it seems to me, want the Church to stand up for, and promote, a moral stance that is above the morally degenerative character of our society: they look for the Church to take a lead in these vitally important areas instead of coming up with initiatives for getting people back into churches, where people may be welcomed, but where they may not know what they are supposed to believe.

There has always been division among Christians on matters of doctrine and practice, causing the large number of denominations we encounter today. But, Christians are all human beings, and, as such, we are all sinful: all of us are partisan; we take sides with the people with whom we agree and we create a place where we feel comfortable, where our views and opinions are not challenged. This, unfortunately, is what many church communities are like today: cosy, holy clubs for those who have been coming for years, who are suspicious of change, innovation and new blood. These are the churches where any new-comers may feel not welcomed, as they should be, but made to feel like outsiders, unwelcome and not valued. Obviously, I hope, all of us would recognise that this is not what a Christian community is called to be, and we might express that with our lips, but do we express it by the way we behave?

This was the problem encountered by Jesus with his disciples' behaviour in today's Gospel reading. They had very much an 'in-group' mentality: they were suspicious of the 'strange exorcist', who had been casting out demons in Jesus' name. The reason for their suspicion was because he was not 'one of us': he was an outsider, who happened to be working for Jesus rather than against him even though he did not belong to Jesus' close circle of disciples. Jesus' inclusivity is manifest here: he does not forbid this exorcist from working in his name,

but rather encourages it. Jesus teaches the disciples that even outside of the group of followers that they consider acceptable, the Holy Spirit could work through those who accept the name of Jesus and who live their lives by his commandments.

A similar situation was encountered by Moses in the first reading from the book of Numbers. God's Spirit had been poured out upon Eldad and Medad, so that they began prophesying as well as the seventy elders. This caused Joshua to question Moses, and ultimately, to question God, as to upon whom the Spirit had been poured. Moses replied: 'If only the whole people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord had poured out his Spirit on them all!' Because, ultimately, it is up to God as to who he decides to pour his Spirit upon: no choice of ours enters into the equation. We can all, at times, be scared of the outsider, of the person who doesn't quite fit in, or whose face doesn't fit. We can be jealous of their motives, or their gifts, and we are motivated, not by charity, but by prejudice and fear.

But it was precisely this prejudice and fear that Christ was teaching his disciples to guard against when they demanded he put a stop to the 'strange exorcist's' work. Jesus' Kingdom is one where 'perfect love casts out fear'; it is a Kingdom where all are welcome, whether they fit the bill or not.

Jesus knew what it was like to be an outcast, an outsider: it was because of his outspokenness against the established order and the religious acceptability of his day, and because he associated with tax collectors and sinners, that he was persecuted and made an outcast himself. So, instead of our Bishops making vacuous, and potentially insulting statements, about which supermarket Jesus might or might not shop in were he walking the earth today, Christians, and our Bishops, should be standing up against the downward moral spiral of society, and, like Jesus, be willing to associate with today's tax collectors and sinners, in order to bring them into the Kingdom.

In our society, people are able to spot a fake, and there is nothing more transparently fake than the Church trying to be 'with-it' and 'relevant'. The Church has never been 'with-it', and if it has, it shouldn't have been. The Church, and Christians, are called to be in the world, but not of the world; speaking up for the oppressed, the down-trodden and the neglected in Jesus' name. At a national level, the Church should always be ready to prick the nation's conscience, especially in moral matters, even though some people may say that religion should be kept out of politics. Our Lord has given us an example to follow, as we seek to defend those less fortunate, or less able, or less acceptable to society than ourselves.

For when Christ predicted his suffering and death, he said, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all people to myself'. He didn't say, 'just a few', or 'those who are in my intimate circle', or 'those who society finds acceptable', but 'all'. And whether we like it or not, that includes the prostitute, the paedophile, the alcoholic, the drug dealer, the pimp, the abusive husband, the violent teenager, the adulterous wife. Christ's blood was shed for all, and all are welcome in his Kingdom, are deserving of the Gospel message, are in need of Christ's love and healing touch. All of us will be judged with the same judgement, and that will be whether or not we have clothed the naked, fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, visited the sick and those in prison, for, as Our Lord solemnly reminds us, 'Whatsoever you did to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.'

So, as far as 'Back to Church Sunday' goes, it's not the initiatives, gimmicks and trendy statements from Bishops that are going to get people to come back to Church: if the Church speaks with a moral authority and a single voice in its rightful place at the heart of our national life; only when we Christians stop fighting with each other and being inward looking, focusing our efforts on mission and evangelism; only when we stop viewing the outsider with suspicion or fear or jealousy; then people might start to come back to church. The Church's relevance isn't in trying to make itself 'with-it', up-to-date and trendy: the

Church relevance is in that she proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified, and that her members live out the message of the Gospel, by living out Christ's commandment to love in a practical way that is free from preference, prejudice and fear. If people could see Christians living the Gospel, and not just preaching it, then they might start to come back to church.

Amen.