

LEAVING THE CHURCH

Have you ever left an important organisation? And if so how did it feel? I used to be a member of a political party but when I became Bp of Oxford I felt I ought to identify with every inhabitant of the diocese and every MP, so I left – feeling rather guilty about quietly leaving.

One of the concerns church leaders have at present is whether people will come back to church after the pandemic, or whether they'll quietly leave. Of course, we're here, in person or on line, but will we find we've lost a fair number of people who've found, for one reason or another, that they don't need to come to church anymore? And will that loosening of ties with church-going result in some people not really *believing* in the faith anymore? They've found they could get along without it, and the sky didn't fall in.

And the question Jesus then asks is, 'Do you also want to go away?' That's what was happening in today's gospel. It had all got too much for some of the followers of Jesus. They'd been excited by Jesus' radical teaching about the Kingdom of God and by the amazing healings and all the buzz going on in Galilee, but now Jesus was moving on from talking about the bread they'd found to feed that crowd on the hillside, to talking about him somehow **being** the bread himself, bread from heaven, the bread of life. These followers now felt it was all getting a bit too intense; they wanted to cool it all down and go back to the simpler stuff.

And some of them started to drift away. And Jesus said to those who were left, 'Do you also want to go away?' Good old Peter leapt in to rally the troops and to reassure Jesus: 'Are we going away too? No way! Who else would we go to? You've got everything we need. We're staying.'

People leave the church for any number of reasons – boredom with its worship, irritation with its leaders, saddened by its small agendas, disillusioned by its lack of depth, hurt by its disciplines, and so on. We rightly have high expectations of the church as a holy community, called to live differently; so we feel all the more let down when it turns out to be as flawed as any other human institution. A comedian once quipped, 'I've come to view Jesus the way I view Elvis. I love the guy, but the fan club really freaks me out.'

On the other hand, some people leave because they've been scared by the scale of the gospel challenge, as was the case with some of those early followers of Jesus. They were coming to realise that the gospel involves a

thorough overhaul of our priorities, our motives, life choices, indeed our whole world-view. In particular it involves a fierce allegiance to Jesus, a man unlike any other. They decided it was too much and they slipped away. As Mark Twain said, 'It's not the parts of the gospel that I **don't** understand which cause me difficulty – it's the demand of those that I **do** understand.'

So will the parishioners of the CofE stay? It may be the case that there are some in our churches who are sitting on the edge of things, not quite sure they're in the right place, but unwilling to turn away completely. My message always is - stay in the church and make it better! If you take a log out of the fire it'll glow for a while but eventually it'll go out – as our faith too may go out when it's lost contact with the place where the spiritual fire is visibly burning. Changing the image, the church is like Noah's Ark - that old boat must have smelt pretty bad inside, but if you tried to get out, you'd drown. We need the church; we need each other.

Of course the church fails. So does every other human institution – politics, the education system, the law, the City, the NHS – though I gather the NHS is in very good hands now... The human body fails too – indeed it's never completely healthy. Generally it functions pretty well but we're never completely whole, some part of it always niggles. So it is with the church – the *Body* of Christ. If we leave this body of believers we'll miss the glorious messy muddle that is God's church, the acts of love and courage, of sanity and saintliness that happen here. Of course the church is both magnificent and bonkers. So are we. We're the rusty containers to which the pure water of the gospel has been entrusted, and the water we pour out is sadly somewhat discoloured.

But we're following the scent of 'life in all its fulness.' As Peter said, If we want that, where else can we go; Jesus has the words of eternal life. This is where life is integrated in the love of God; this is where we learn about the new world *where love is the way*. This is where we find the resources to begin to *live* that way – bread and wine, tales and dreams, faith, hope and love.

There are two mistakes we can make about the church. One is to take it too seriously, and the other is not to take it seriously enough. When we take the church too seriously we make it the essential Ark of Salvation. But God is the Saviour, not the church. The church tells the story of God, as Jesus did, opening It out before his listeners. But if we focus on the church as an organisation we risk becoming irrelevant; we become managers and salespeople of 'the right

system' rather than storytellers for Jesus. In the words of Brian McLaren, 'Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "Hey folks, we're going to start a new, centralised, institutional religion, and name it after me." He launched a movement, with the classic words, "follow me." The church is that body of people who have been captivated by the life and teaching of Jesus and are now seeking to follow him into a new way of living, a new world.

We're celebrating the fact that Martin and Anna have been married for a year. Wendy and I have been married for 49 years last week. Together we win gold! But there must have been times when Wendy would have answered the question, 'Do you want to go away?' with a clear, 'When's the next train?' But she hasn't gone away. Nor will Martin or Anna go away. What happens ideally in marriage is that we grow year by year into a deeper union we couldn't imagine breaking. Think of the following quote from Capt Corelli's Mandolin as applying both to marriage, and also to our relationship with the Church:

Pelagia's father is talking to his daughter about love, and he says this: 'Love is a temporary madness. It erupts like a volcano and then subsides. And when it subsides you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your roots have so entwined together that it's inconceivable that you should ever part. Because that what love is. Love isn't breathlessness, it's not excitement, it's not the promise of eternal passion. That's just being 'in love' which any fool can do. Your mother and I had it, we had roots that grew towards each other underground, and when all the pretty blossoms had fallen from our branches we found that we were one tree and not two. It doesn't sound very exciting, but it is!'

Being a member of the church may not sound very exciting but it is! Our roots hopefully grow together so that it's inconceivable that we should ever part.

Be part of this adventure. Put up with the frustrations of the Church of England. Rejoice in its holy sanity. A journalist once wrote this: 'Why do I love the CofE? Let me count the ways. I love it because it is patient. It doesn't expect the world to change in an instant, or to be bludgeoned into belief, because it knows that certain things take centuries. I love it because it is kind. It is kind enough to welcome strangers, whatever their beliefs, and shake their hands, and offer them a coffee after church. I like the way that it isn't arrogant or rude. I like the fact that it doesn't insist on its own way, but is genuinely

tolerant of other religious beliefs – and none. I like the fact that it doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing but quietly presents an ethical framework of kindness. I like the fact that it believes in the values of the New Testament, and of St Paul's description of love (which I've just paraphrased), but also believes it's more important to embody them than to quote them. I like the fact that it doesn't speak like a child, think like a child, or reason like a child. I like the fact that it's mature enough to value faithful doubt...' and so on.

I like it! Do you also want to go away? I hope not. After all, as a friend of mine says, there's nothing wrong with the CofE that the Second Coming can't sort out. Don't worry about the CofE not being up to it. The good news is that God has already got down to it. He's come to us in Jesus Christ, who lives in his church, and loves it, and invites us into the enormous privilege of being part of it.

Alleluia!