

Why Do We Keep Meeting Like This?

A talk by *Martin Wroe*

Sunday July 10th 2022.

Why do we keep meeting like this?

Reading from this ancient book, saying these prayers, singing these songs?

Week after week. Year after year.

Not everyone is.

Chances are that if you went to church as a young person, many of those who went with you... no longer do.

The Church of England recently celebrated a jubilee – the seventieth consecutive year of numerical decline.

So why do *we* keep meeting like this?

Recently, at something called the Deanery Chapter, where local clergy meet up, the conversation turned to church life since lockdown.

Over twenty years, said one man I've seen the congregation rise from forty to seventy – but now it's collapsed to barely half that.

Key volunteers are exhausted he added – they've stood down, they need a break.

Other clergy murmured in understanding – I thought how hard it must be to be a vicar today.

Another vicar said that since the pandemic people had

less **capacity**

less **engagement**

... and more **entitlement**.

It got me thinking about this community, the one we share, where we've slowly, haltingly, been returning to ourselves...

But where some people who were once regular are less present. And some people are absent.

Some people moved out of London during lockdown... some lost the Sunday morning habit.

Churchgoing changed – joining online meant we could choose what parts of the service to tune into.

Or choose not to tune in.

To do something else.

Imagine having a free morning.

The pandemic changed our working patterns and our friendship networks... and how we relate to church.

So why do we keep meeting like this?

Coming to church – what is it like? Here's some suggestions.

Sometimes church is like a **school or college** – where we consider the divine call on every life and how to walk in the way of Jesus Christ.

Other times church is like a **show** – where a priest celebrates the drama of the eucharist and we all join in with the showtunes.

Or it might be like a **club** – on a good day a club focussed on the needs of people not in the club.

Other times church is like a **market** – where we consume ideas or invitations, prayer and company.

Church might be like a **campaign** or a **movement** – where we become part of something bigger, working for the common good.

Other times church is like a **clinic** or a **hospital** – where people who recognise they are unwell – all of us at different times – may find healing, wellbeing, balance and forgiveness.

School. Show. Club. Market. Movement. Hospital

A church may be all of these.

The odd thing is that Jesus of Nazareth may never have meant us to be here this morning.

Never planned on this thing we call church.

He was interested in community – he gathered twelve friends, they talked and travelled, they ate together and supported each other.

He wanted to reform elitist religious practice – nothing made him more furious than the hypocrisy of religious professionals.

He told stories about justice...and prayer... and healing.

Stories about compassion like the one we heard earlier – stories with a twist where the so-called righteous people (in this story it's a priest) walk straight past those in desperate need.

In his stories it's the outsider – maybe the stranger or foreigner (in this story someone from Samaria) – who are those who stop and make time for the wounded person.

The stories of Jesus were about another kind of world where the first were last and the last first... where the bereaved and the prisoner and the hungry and the broke travelled first class.

But a foundation in his own name? An institution?

Not really.

That mainly emerged among his followers, especially Paul, a few years later.

In her book *Leaving Church* the writer and priest Barbara Brown Taylor puts it like this:

Jesus preached the coming of the kingdom, but it was the church that came.

All these years later, the way many of us are doing church is broken and we know it, even if we do not know what to do about it.

We proclaim the priesthood of all believers while we continue with hierarchical clergy, liturgy, and architecture.

We follow someone who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time while we fund and defend our own.

We speak and sing of divine transformation while we do everything in our power to maintain our equilibrium.'

But slowly how we think about church is changing.

In the past, says Professor Linda Woodhead at London's Kings College, religions like Christianity or Judaism offered packages of beliefs and values – and people met to discuss the holy writings and make sure everyone had the right beliefs.

But now she says, religion is deregulating itself – it's no longer about a separate sphere under the control of religious leaders and authorities.

Religions are being democratised.

Faith may be handed on to us, say by our parents... but then we handle it ourselves.

We shape it, mould it, curate it.

We no longer just accept it.

In this deregulated religion, we are more likely to customise our own beliefs.

Take Dave here, who won't mind me telling you (because I checked beforehand) that as a younger man he was highly influenced by the charismatic Christian and house church movement.

He didn't smuggle Bibles into communist countries (that was his partner Hilary) but he did go abroad as a missionary – to Italy to try and convert Catholics.

But ask him what he believes today and he'll tell you he's not sure about God. Maybe.

He's more in tune with Buddhism, certainly a kind of Christian Buddhism.

But he hasn't given up on Christianity because he's so attracted to its 'mystical and social justice expressions.'

That's the faith that drives his political activism.

Two of the signs of deregulated religion, says Linda Woodhead are first that this religion is highly participatory.

'People don't want to sit passively anymore; they want to be active agents in their own spiritual lives, so forms of religion that encourage participation... are doing well.'

Maybe this is what that vicar I heard meant when he said people are feeling more 'entitled' – they want to take part, to collaborate, to share ownership of their churches.

If that were to happen then churches would not be called St Thomas's or St George's or St Luke's... but St Everyone's.

Second, says Professor Woodhead, religious leaders have to think less about leading people in the old sense and more about partnership.

'It's more about facilitating, encouraging and offering resources to people as they live out their spiritual lives.'

Last year George said he loved the community of St Lukes but the services didn't really press his buttons... or those of his 20-something friends.

Would it be ok if a bunch of them started their own thing?

It would be ok.

They meet together on alternate Mondays. They run their own show.

The Daily Prayer group which began during lockdown still draws people for 25 minutes on zoom every day.

Some like Rebecca moved away during lockdown while some like Michael and Jenny live thousands of miles away.

The group leads itself. Someone new every day.

Or Craft and Chat on Thursdays led by Lizzie and Meg, a creative meeting for those for whom English is not their first language.

Each group is small, provisional and fragile... emerging from the bottom up, not top down.

So what about Sunday services like this where many of us feel a sense of the St Luke's identity?

Are we here to attend or to participate?

I remember Crispin telling me about ten years ago that he comes to church to sing in the choir – if he couldn't sing he probably wouldn't come.

For him participation is all. Church is not about attending but about owning.

Why do we keep meeting like this?

For many reasons but underneath all of them what we are doing is enacting our faith – we are here to behave our beliefs.

Pope Benedict – the one before Francis – said the Christian message was not only ‘informative’ but ‘performative’.

We are not here just to believe but to behave.

The good news of Jesus Christ, he said, ‘Is not merely a communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing.’

We keep meeting like this ... to change ourselves... and to change our world.

Not to announce good news but to become the good news.

We are here as the community theologian Ann Morisy puts it, not just to recite prophecy but to enact prophecy.

This is why, even though they can go on a bit, no part of our service is holier than the notices at the end.

Tara promoting the Food Bank.

Dan or Stef planning the winter nightshelter.

Holly announcing a climate demo.

A community hoping to behave their beliefs, to enact their prophecy.

So why do we keep meeting like this?

Our habits changed during the pandemic... but habits are the scaffolding of our lives.

And when we meet together to pray or hear the Bible or share bread and wine we are forming habits.

Changing our characters.

We are becoming people more able to tune in to the divine imagination on the other days of the week – when difficult choices confront us or dark events overwhelm us.

By sharing life together we learn from each other and stumble upon the divine presence in our connections.

We practice the life we believe in.

When we share the peace – enacting the life we believe we are called to, to be peacemakers.

When we pray it's because we believe the divine spirit is present for good in all of history.

Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martin in the Fields, calls this *improvising*.

Being part of a church is where we learn our lines so that we can improvise our faith the rest of the time.

We play our parts, so that in the rest of life, as he puts it, we can 'faithfully improvise on the Christian tradition'.

School. Show. Club. Market. Movement. Hospital

Why do we keep meeting like this?

Because this is where we practice our faith and rehearse our religion.

This is where we learn our lines... so that we can improvise our role as followers of Jesus during the rest of our life.

This is where we restore our souls to live in this good world we share.