

SERMON: Why Go To Church?

Why go to church? Why make the effort, week by week, year by year, to set aside the time, to get ready, to travel to a building which for most of us is much further away than our local parish church or non-conformist chapel?

Opinion polls indicate that fewer than half the population have any affiliation with any particular church or chapel. And in many cases, that affiliation with a particular church or chapel is of the most flimsy and tenuous kind: perhaps they were married there, or their parents were married there, or their children attended Sunday School for a while.

Only a minority of the weddings, christenings and funerals I have conducted have had a real and substantial link with our congregations. Most of them are in the "my grandmother was christened there" category. I am quite happy to conduct their ceremonies, as part of our witness and service to the wider community. I've heard and seen the relief, for example, when a divorced person learns that we will not shut our doors against them.

But very few of those couples or families really enquire about Unitarianism. Very few of them subsequently attend regular Sunday services; even fewer become paid-up members of congregations.

Let me hasten to make it clear that I do not regard weddings, christenings or funerals as a recruiting exercise. It is of course gratifying if anyone who has had an initial contact in such a way does develop enough interest and sense of fellowship to want to become a regular attender or member. But that is not part of my willingness to make our services available to them.

So:- Many people fill in the box marked Religion without really thinking about it. They are Anglicans, or Methodists, or Roman Catholics, or Unitarians, or whatever, but make no claim to active membership.

As for understanding the creeds or principles of the religion to which they claim an affiliation, they remain ignorant and indifferent.

Once upon a time - say, 500 years ago - the Church was a major influence in people's lives, quite apart from its specifically religious role. The Church provided not only the priests and the preachers, but also most of the teachers, administrators, social workers.

In those days, of course, there was little incentive and less encouragement to question what the Church said or did. It was assumed and expected that everyone would think alike, and would accept his/her place in the order of things. Heretics were dealt with in ways that did not encourage other heretics.

What we today take for granted, as our right to criticise and evaluate religious beliefs and practices, came only after long and bitter struggle.

The Reformation, which made such an impact on the Christian world, divided Europe into warring Catholic and Protestant camps. During the 17th century, freedom of conscience gradually came to be recognised and accepted, though not without fierce opposition from the Catholic Church. Today, churches of all denominations recognise that society **can** hold together, despite the fact that it is composed of people who hold radically different views about religion and the role of churches in people's lives. That extends to, and includes, other faiths and traditions, but today I want to limit my remarks to the Christian tradition because that is the one in which our Unitarian faith is grounded.

We have discarded some of the concepts and doctrines which have historically been most distinctive of Christianity, such as the Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Virgin Birth, the physical resurrection of Jesus, vicarious atonement through his crucifixion, a trinity of separate but co-existent and co-equal personal divine beings. We have moved away from much of the liturgical language and sacramental expression of orthodox Christianity. We are comfortable to explore and learn about the other great religions which have served the needs of billions of people.

But our religious inheritance is rooted in Christianity, and it seems appropriate that we confine ourselves to that, rather than risk such a . wide focus that it merely becomes blurred.

Even within our Christian tradition, there is plenty of **variety**: creeds, concepts, architecture, language, liturgies.

The late Maurice Bonner, sometime Minister of Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds, wrote a poem some years ago which reflects this variety.

MY CHURCH

My church is a Meeting-House, venerable, old;
' Built two centuries ago, I'm told;
A wonderful place where my faith can unfold,
And my soul can come nearer to God.

My church is a Chapel, just off the main street,
Pews of pitch-pine, and always kept neat,
Where my forebears, for years, have paid for a seat;
It is here that I talk to my God.

My church is a Church with a tower and spire,
Stained-glass aflame with Pre-Raphaelite fire,
Where singing is led by a many-voiced choir;
It is here that my heart praises God.

Sometimes in the silence I ponder and muse
On those who sit in other church pews;
Do they, like myself, really hear the Good News,
That we all are the children of God.

Meeting-House, Chapel, Church.
Unfolding faith, pew rents, stained glass.
History, architecture, music.

Coming nearer to God, talking to God, praising God.
Variety of concepts; variety of expression.

But', for all, the same Good News. A core common to
all the buildings and congregations.

There is another, anonymous little poem which says
something the same as Maurice Bonner's, and also provides part of
the answer to the question in my sermon title: "Why go to
church?"

CHURCHES

Beautiful is the large church,
With stately arch and steeple;
Neighbourly is the small church,
With groups of friendly people;
Reverent is the old church,
With centuries of grace;
A wooden church or a stone church
Can hold an altar place,
And be a lofty chapel.
A meeting-house, low and square,
It is indeed a great church
If there is worship there.

"If there is worship there". That sounds like a reason for going to
church.

The Industrial Revolution pushed the churches from the centre of society. The concern (of most people) became primarily economic. Then education became compulsory, and since then there seems to have been a steady decline in church going.

What had previously been the responsibility of the churches, in caring for the sick, the aged, the handicapped, the unemployed, gradually became the concern of government. The Welfare State took over much of what the churches had done.

The churches, which had been so relevant to the needy, lost a little more of their power to persuade people to come through their doors.

And scientific development and education created difficulties, especially for the more orthodox churches with their fixed creeds and catechisms. As people found it harder to believe what their churches were teaching -- harder to reconcile their religion with their education-- some gave up going to church and some came to think that church-going was quite unnecessary and a waste of anyone's time.

But: not everyone

There are still people who believe that there is something greater than themselves: a creative force and a spirit of truth, goodness, beauty and love which some of us call God. There are still people who feel a need to worship their God. And many of those people value the support and companionship of others of like mind.

So: people go to church for various reasons. But those reasons often have something to do with ideas of God, or greater being, or worship, or quest for truth -- beyond merely the social fellowship which might be found equally well in a sports club, bingo hall or community centre. Such places have their value; they are important in our often fragmented society. But they rarely have much to offer in terms of the spiritual dimension of life,

Going to church can be regarded as the occasion for renewing our spiritual strength and inspiration;- for "re-charging our batteries" in preparation for the week ahead. That -- of course -- implies some regularity of attendance. Some of us would claim . that the road to a better world passes through the church doors, for without religion people's views of life are usually limited.

Too many people who avoid any church commitment choose the short cut and the easy road to the materialist goals they have set up for themselves. Going to church helps to give people a higher conception of their place in the universe; it gives a sense of purpose to their lives; it develops respect and kindly feelings for their fellows.

No guarantees, of course! Much depends on the churches themselves, and on the ways in which they proclaim their message. It is not possible today to rely on the authority of the preacher before a captive and submissive audience.

More's the pity!

As church attendance has stopped being regarded as 'compulsory, and more people have thought for themselves about their religion, those who do attend have become more active as participants rather than passive listeners.

Within our Unitarian tradition: Although we like to consider ourselves as a group of thinking people, with a heritage of high intellectual endeavour, the traditional service, with an academic sermon as the highlight of the proceedings, is gradually giving way to a greater emphasis on poetry, music, exploration of feelings, and discussion.

Rather than monologue, sermon or lecture, members of our congregations value being able to talk about their ideas. Perhaps one of the reasons is that too 'many sermons in too many churches seem to be answering questions which no-one is asking, and ignoring, the issues and problems that people face in their daily lives.

No longer is the minister the linch-pin of a church's success, however capable and hard-working she or he may be (And begging entirely the question of how we might define "success" for a church). Much depends on the work and the enthusiasm of the people in the pews, who create and are the congregation. Success has to be worked for from both sides. People need to be "doers of the word and not hearers only". As the apostle James reminds us: Faith without works is dead.

It can be an uphill battle. Many thoughtful people are asking whether it is possible for a person to have a genuinely satisfactory religious life without bothering with churches and church institutions.

That is an important question, especially to people who accept that religion is a vital element in their lives but who do not see any necessary connection between religion and the institutions we call churches.

Indeed, the more that some people see of some churches and church institutions, the less willing they are to accept that they need the help of any church in order to be religious or to express their religion.

So: Why go to church?

One way to answer that question is to ask the same sort of question about other spheres of human experience and activity.

For example:

Why isn't it possible to get a good education without bothering with schools?

Why isn't it possible to have an orderly and efficient communal life without bothering with governments?

Everyone finds plenty to criticise in the conduct of our schools and governments. So, why don't we try to get along without schools and governments? Why not abolish schools, colleges and universities, and get our education without them? Why not abolish governments, and learn to live together in peace and harmony without all the administrative machinery of parliaments, councils, and departments to get in our way and make life complicated?

The simple answer is: We can't.

We need our human institutions, and we need to use them, with and in spite of all their failings, faults and limitations.

In this respect, religion is very much like any other major concern. The church is the institution by means of which we seek to foster and promote values of faith and character. It is liable to all the ills which beset all human institutions.

Nevertheless, it is the one human institution established for the development, expression and support of spiritual values.

With all its failings, faults and limitations, the church is as indispensable as the schools and governments of our society.

Most of you will know the story of the young monk and the old abbot who were talking as they sat by the fire of glowing embers.

The young monk said: "If God is everywhere - in the fields and streets, in people's homes and in their hearts - and not just inside church buildings like this one (which we call "God's house"), why do people need to go to church? Why can't they simply worship where they are?"

The abbot did not say anything in reply. He bent forward, picked up the fire tongs, removed a glowing coal from the fire, and put it on one side of the hearth. They sat in silence, watching. The fire kept burning brightly and warmly. But the single coal's red glow faded; it became dull black, and cool. Then the abbot bent forward again, and with the fire tongs picked up the cold coal and replaced it on the fire. It soon began glowing, and became as bright and hot as all the other coals.

At last the monk spoke. He said simply: "I understand."

People go to church, to worship; to offer thanks and praise; to seek forgiveness, strength, solace, comfort; to renew their spiritual strength and inspiration; to find answers to their questions about the problems and mysteries of life; to share fellowship.

I find it hard to believe that individuals can do all those things -- satisfy all those needs -- by themselves. There is a sense of fellowship which togetherness in a church can give.

The very recognition which membership of a church implies -- the recognition that there is some kind of higher power which guides our steps, or to which we owe our existence as part of the miracle of life on this earth -- is in itself an ennobling thought. The church is there to help make people more conscious of meaning and purpose in life generally, and in their own lives.

Going to church involves commitment to ideals; it is an expression of our need for something beyond and other than a purely material existence. It involves a consciousness that the church is the organised expression of religion in human life, the place where the values of religion are developed, proclaimed, nurtured and shared.

Rev John Storey wrote hymn number 173, "The Fellowship of the church", in Hymns for Living:

The church is not where altar stands,
Within the hallowed walls,
But where the strong reach out their hands
To raise the one who falls;
Not stately building standing fair
Where folk recite their creeds,
But fellowship and loving care
Which serves all human needs.

The church is not where ancient rite
Is seen on Sabbath days;
But Wisdom's constant beam of light
To guide our common ways;
The Church is me, the Church is you,
Not mortar, brick and stone;
It is with all who love the true
. And where true love is shown.

So may it be.

Amen.