

What is a Christian?

1) Committed to Christ

Readings: Romans chapter 10, verses 5-10; Mark chapter 1, verses 14-20

What is a Christian? You would think that there ought to be an easy answer to that question. There isn't. Even the first Christians were divided in the definition of a Christian. You see the dispute within the New Testament itself. Paul said it was sufficient that a person put their faith in Christ and acknowledged Jesus as Lord. But Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, including James the brother of Jesus, had other ideas. They argued that to be a Christian you not only had to put your faith in Christ but you also had to subscribe to the Law of Moses. For them it was a matter of faith plus circumcision plus Sabbath observance plus obedience to the Jewish ritual.

2000 years later the situation is even more confused. The three major streams of Church life; Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox have each developed their own traditions in terms of which they define a Christian. I want to try and go behind these traditions and define a Christian in terms of three basic commitments; a commitment to Christ, a commitment to the Church and a commitment to the world.

A Christian is first and foremost a person who is committed to Christ. That is basic and fundamental. This is how it was for the first disciples. Jesus said to them *"Follow me"*. It was as simple as that.

"Follow me" said Jesus.

1. The first thing to be said is that Jesus did not insist on any doctrinal pre-conditions. A Christian is committed to a Person, not to a series of propositions. When Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John on the shores of Lake Galilee, He didn't shove a photo-stat copy of the Apostles' Creed in front of them and say *"Believe that, then follow me"*. Their primary commitment was to Him as a person; the propositions came afterwards. I am aware that those first disciples were all Jews and Jesus was able to take their belief in God for granted. But the fact remains that their initial calling was not to believe but to follow.

Too often we put the cart before the horse and insist that people subscribe to a statement of belief in order to become a Christian. I recently received an evangelistic pamphlet through the post from a Christian group and it was made abundantly clear that, to be a Christian, one had to subscribe to the following beliefs:

- Belief in the Virgin Birth
- Belief in the death of Christ as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sin and guilt
- Belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus
- Belief in His imminent, physical return to earth
- Belief in the Bible as the inspired, infallible Word of God.

Now, if those statements constitute the essential pre-requisites of being a Christian you must count me out. At best I can only subscribe to half of two of them and even that takes a great deal of effort!

But Jesus did not insist on any doctrinal pre-conditions. He only asked His disciples who they thought He was towards the end of His ministry. For starters it was enough that they follow Him.

Which doesn't mean that I belittle the value and importance of doctrine – Far from it. But doctrine is something you grow into, not something you start off with. And I ask you to consider those first disciples. Knowing nothing about a miraculous birth they first followed Jesus as a Man; an inspired Teacher and an inspiring Leader. Living with Him made them realise that He was much more than this and they called Him the Messiah. "Messiah", however, carries no implication of divinity and it was only after the resurrection that Thomas went all the way; "My Lord and my God" he said. It took Thomas three years to get to that point and then only in the aftermath of the resurrection.

So it might well be for many people today. If anyone asked me what he must do to become a Christian the last thing I would do would be to launch into an explanation of the Trinity. I would start off where Jesus began – by asking him to commit his life to Christ. The process and experience of following would very soon raise questions and the answers would bring us into the area of doctrine and belief. But the initial step lies in a commitment to a Person and not to a whole series of propositional statements however true they might be.

2. Secondly this: Jesus did not insist on any moral pre-conditions. He never suggested that in order to qualify as a Christian you have to have five A-levels in moral goodness. Just look at the initial qualifications of those first followers: Matthew was a fraudulent tax collector who lined his own pockets by over-charging his fellow countrymen. One of the Mary's was a notorious woman of the streets. Simon the Zealot was a blood and thunder nationalist, wholly committed to the cause of violent revolution. Zaccheus was an Income Tax official who defrauded people left, right and centre. Yet Jesus called them to follow Him. Of course their characters underwent a radical transformation in the process but the point is that the change took place after they committed themselves to follow Him, not before. Jesus never suggested nor required them to become perfect before they followed Him.

So too with us. In order to become a Christian we don't have to reach a prior standard of goodness. Jesus calls us as we are with all our faults and failings, doubts and fears. In the words of the hymn:

"Just as I am; thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve".

That's it! Just as I am. Its not a question of being good enough. Nor is it a question of believing certain things in advance. It is a question of our willingness to follow, to commit our lives to Him and to accept the consequences.

There will be consequences! There will be consequences in terms of belief and behaviour. There will be sacrifices that must be made. Nobody is suggesting that following will be easy. Jesus Himself disabused His disciples that following Him would be a bed of roses. And so it has been for every follower. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was hanged in a German concentration camp for his opposition to Hitler once said; "When Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die" and following can't get any more serious than that.

But those are consequences. The starting point is further back. A Christian is a person who is committed to Christ; a person who has accepted Christ's call to follow Him and pledged his life to do just that. It is important to remember that this is the starting point and not the end point of being a Christian. But the starting point is crucial.

What is a Christian?

2) Commitment to the Church

Readings: Acts chapter 2, verses 37-47; Matthew chapter 16, verses 13-20

I am trying to define a Christian in terms of a three-fold commitment. The first, and prior, commitment is to Christ. The second commitment is to the Church.

Commitment to the Church

I am conscious that I am batting on a very sticky wicket here. For many people (including some Christians) the Church is no more than an optional extra. It's a luxury they can very well do without. For 40 years now I have been regaled with the mantra "You can be a good Christian without going to Church". It is often said that nature is the best temple in which to worship. So people repeat the phrase

*"You are nearer God's heart in a garden
than anywhere else on earth"*

Obviously they prefer God's fresh air to the parson's hot air. I have a sneaking sympathy sometimes but sympathy does not mean I agree with them. Far from it.

The Church is neither a luxury nor an optional extra. It is part and parcel of being a Christian. Obviously I am not thinking of the Church as a building or an organisation. Nor am I defining it in terms of any one denomination. I am arguing for the Church as a community, and arguing against the kind of individualism which so bedevils Western (and especially Protestant) Christianity. I am arguing that our faith must be personal (a commitment to Christ) but it can never be individualistic. To be a Christian is to belong to Christ and to the Church.

1. I offer two images/models of the Church to make the point.

Jesus, in a conversation with Nicodemus said that becoming a Christian was like being "born again". There is a clue there. Nobody is born an orphan! Like it or not we are born into a family. We have a father and a mother (even if these days one of them is not around for very long). It is also likely that we have a couple of brothers and sisters. In other words we are born into a family. We have no choice in the matter. And whether we like our parents or our brothers/sisters is irrelevant. Even if we walk away and disown them nothing can alter the biological fact that these are our parents; these are our brothers/sisters.

The Church is the family of God. We are born into that family. We have God as our Father; the Church as our Mother and every other Christian, a brother or sister. We ought to take that family relationship seriously. And if that family relationship is broken up; if we walk away from it then we ourselves and the family are diminished. What sort of a family is it who all live in the same locality yet never get together except perhaps at Christmas? The word "dysfunctional" springs to mind. And that is what the Church, the family of God has become; dysfunctional.

Or consider another model. The Church has been described as the "army of the living God". And it is not a bad model given that the world today is a battle ground in which the forces of good and evil are locked in a life or death struggle. But what an army! We are much more a disorganised and totally undisciplined rabble. Can you imagine what would have happened had Churchill ordered a general mobilisation to ward off the threat of a Nazi invasion in 1940 and only 20% of those called up bothered to report for duty? And the rest simply offered apologies or excuses? Yet that is the reality of the Church today. And we seriously expect to ward off the enemy and win the war!

Born into a family. Conscripted into the army of God. Whichever model you choose the implication is the same. We belong together.

2. But there is another way of looking at it. That is by using experience instead of models. If the truth be told virtually all our experience and knowledge of God comes via the people of God.

We value the Bible as the foundation document of our Faith. Without the Bible we would have no knowledge of Jesus at all. And without the Church we would have no Bible. For over a 1000 years every copy of the Bible was hand written; often by monks in monastic communities who worked in secret and sometimes with the threat of death hanging over them. The fact that we have a Bible today is thanks to the Christian community; the Church.

And, without the Church, I would not be a Christian or here today. I first heard the Gospel in a Methodist Church in Rhodesia as it then was. And there was a Methodist Church in Rhodesia simply because Methodists in Britain sent and supported missionaries at considerable financial cost. The same applies to every other denomination. I could take you today to any number of Christian congregations throughout Zimbabwe; in out of the way places like Syansundu and Shurugwi, Gwaai and Gweru. Their existence is due to the fact that the Methodist Missionary Society sponsors them to the tune of over £1m a year. And that £1m is given by congregations all over Britain. If Christians had adopted the policy of opting out of the Church in favour of privately worshipping God in a garden there would be no Church in Zimbabwe and I would not be here.

Or consider this:— without the Church none of us would grow significantly in our Christian Faith and experience. I am not one for hearing Celestial Voices or seeing Heavenly Visions. Virtually everything that I know of God has come via the people of God. And if I have taught you anything about God in the last few years it is because for the last 45 years the Church has taught and supported and sustained me.

There is a story told of an old man sitting with his grandson around a coal fire. The youngster was arguing that the Church was unnecessary: you could be just as good a Christian without belonging to it. The old man said nothing. He took a pair of tongs and lifted a glowing coal out of the fire and placed it on the hearth. They both watched in silence as the glow faded and the coal cooled to any ugly black lump of nothing. Then the old man picked it up again, put it back into the fire, and again it glowed red with light and warmth.

There you have it. Outside of the worship and fellowship of the Church the flame of our own personal faith flickers and fades and eventually dies. The Church is not an optional extra. It is an indispensable necessity.

Of course it has its shortcomings. It is made up of imperfect people. Over 50 years the Church has not only inspired and sustained me, it has also frustrated and infuriated me. It has been incompetent and complacent and weak and sinful. But that's partly because I am in it! There are a thousand good reasons for getting out. But it's the only Church we have. And, anyway, it is God's Church, not ours. In the end we cannot do without it.

What is a Christian? A person who is committed to Christ? — Yes. And also a person who is committed to the Church.

What is a Christian?

3) Commitment to the World

Readings: 2 Corinthians chapter 5, Verses 16–21; Matthew chapter 13, verses 31–33

In two previous sermons I have looked at the question “What is a Christian?” It involves a three-fold commitment: To Christ; to the Church; to the World.

Many would disagree with a commitment to the world. So much Christian teaching suggests that the world is evil and therefore needs to be negated, not affirmed. There is quite a lot in the New Testament to back this up. The world, the flesh and the devil are the prime enemies of Christ and the Christian, to be resisted at all costs. It was one of the reasons why Christians fled to monastic communities in the desert and some went to extraordinary lengths to avoid infection by the world. Simon Stylites built himself a platform 20 ft above ground level and lived up there to get away from the world, the flesh and the Devil!

But they got it wrong. The world is not to be denied and written off as an evil and God-forsaken place. Two of the greatest texts in the New Testament tell us why:

God so loved the world that he gave His only Son (John chapter 3, verse 16)

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (Corinthians chapter 5, verse 19)

The reason why we should try and opt out of the world is because the world is God’s creation and it is the object of His redemptive love. If God should love the world so much that he came Himself, in Christ into the world, then who are we to reverse the process and scorn the world for which Christ died ?

So then we ought to be committed to the world in a positive and an affirmative way. Which is not to say that we should turn a blind eye to the evils inherent in our world. It is no use pretending that everything in the garden is lovely. It isn’t. The reason why God came in Christ was not because the world was perfect but because it needed to be redeemed and reconciled. And exactly the same goes for the world in which we live today. Except that God’s redeeming and reconciling work is carried on through His people **in** the world.

The world!

Consider first the world of nature. That needs to be redeemed. Humankind has effectively plundered the natural world. In search of profit and prosperity we have poisoned the seas and polluted the atmosphere and pillaged the earth. And Christians are so often content to let it be so – all the while rejoicing in their own personal salvation. To be a Christian and to be committed to the world means that the Christian thing to do is to pursue a “green agenda”. It is to align ourselves with those who are fighting to preserve the environment and to support every effort aimed at sustainable development. (We don’t have to be signed-up members of Green Peace to do this!). And, at a very personal and local level, being committed to the world of nature means that we take our bottles and papers to the recycling bank rather than dump them on a land-fill site. It is such simple things which constitute being a Christian in the world.

Or consider the world of international relationships. That needs to be redeemed. We are faced these days with increasingly disturbing pictures of the carnage in Syria and Iraq and throughout that region.. And what lies behind that carnage? Yes it is the evil of fanaticism, the lust for power, the hatred which lurks in everyone. But it was also the poverty and the injustices which so many people suffer that fuels those hatreds. That poverty persists. Those injustices are still with us. The

seed-beds in which 'ISIL' flourishes are to be found all over our world; not only in Iraq and Syria and Palestine but in Asia, Europe and Africa. And yet Christians are content simply to wring their hands in horror and claim that these are merely signs of an approaching *End-Time* in which God's judgement will sort out the mess – meanwhile we rejoice in our own personal salvation.

Being committed to the world means aligning ourselves with those who fight for justice. It means supporting every agency working to eradicate hunger and poverty when and where we can. It is not just a question of fighting against terrorism but fighting for right relationships and peace and a decent quality of life for all humankind. That is what it means to be a Christian in the world today.

And what about the life we live on this small island?

Parsons are forever criticised for waffling on in general terms and always avoiding the specifics. So I shall be specific. And take some random instances. Being a Christian in Britain today means for instance:

- that when it comes to a General Election we cast our vote as an act of Christian responsibility. Obvious you say? But I remind you how a Christian Bank employee at told me she wasn't going to vote in the General Election.. Her actual words were; "I am not going to vote, the result is in God's hands. There is a Referendum coming up at the end of June. The result is not in God's hands but ours.
- that we should get involved with local community affairs. And, if it comes to a choice between going to a prayer meeting or going to a Parent-Teachers meeting at the local school our Christian duty is to go to the PT Meeting, not the prayer meeting.
- that we should see our work as a "vocation" and not just as a necessary evil or a means of earning a living. It is a tragedy that we see some jobs as "vocations" (teachers; nurses, doctors) whilst others are just "jobs". The truth is that we are not called to do a particular job. Our vocation is to "**be**" in whatever job we are doing. Our vocation is to be a Christian in our work; which means to work with integrity and to have a sense that we are "fellow workers with God".

You could go on and argue this kind of affirmative action across the whole range of our lives. Rather than opt out of the world our Christian duty is to get involved. And if you are looking for a model of Christian action in the world you need go no further than the illustration which Jesus used. He spoke of a small bit of leaven within a lump of dough. It works from within and its influence and impact are out of all proportion to its size. Inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God Christians are called to be the leaven in the lump of our society. We ought to live out within our society the values of the Kingdom of God and there can be no rest for us until, in the wonderful words of St John, "*The kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ*".