

What is the church for?

The sermon given by Professor John Sawkins at the Rosyth Methodist Church service of Morning Worship on the 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, 21 January 2024

The readings were: Psalm 146 (StF 837); Mark 1.14–20; Hebrews 10.19–25

From the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 10 and verse 24, "... let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together; as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another ..."

Most Important Event in Nineteenth Century Scotland

A question. What is it that the church, and only the church, does? What is its distinctive function?

Before I have a go at that, here's a test for you.

What was the most important event in Scotland in the 19th century – i.e. between 1800 and 1900?

Was it the great Reform Act of 1832, or the highland famine of the late 1840s? Was it perhaps the death of Sir Walter Scott or James Simpson's use of anaesthetic for the relief of pain?

The list of contenders is long. However, according to Michael Fry, author of the bestselling history of Edinburgh, it was none of these. It was in fact the split or schism that occurred in the Church of Scotland on 18 May 1843.

Within five years of that split the new Free Church of Scotland had built a whole new network of churches throughout the country. Which is why in Edinburgh we have so many churches right across the road from one another. There's a nice example of this competitive church building a couple of hundred yards from where I live, where Buccleuch Free Church towers over the old Buccleuch Parish Church.

Church Closures: Impact

Now, whilst these churches were never full, since the 1950s congregations have shrunk, amalgamations have taken place, and buildings have been repurposed or sold. Lockdown was a tipping point for our sister Church of Scotland which has embarked on a radical programme of merger and sale of churches; and, as we know, this has been the source of great pain and heartache for many within the church.

Interestingly, however, the loudest voices raised against the sales have often been from those outside the church, who have suddenly woken up to the fact that when a church is closed and sold, you lose a whole lot more than a place where people go to pray and sing hymns.

For a start you lose a physical space in which people meet, where meals are served to the homeless, foodbanks supply the needs of the poor, and activities are held which diminish people's sense of isolation.

But you also lose a location where a group of committed people regularly meet. A group of people whose purpose is to relieve suffering through practical action, and to lobby and challenge those in authority and with power to change the way in which the world works; to ensure the poor and the marginalised and the weak don't get cut out or forgotten. To make the world a fairer place.

And this is not just a local issue. On the Christmas edition of *The Rest is Politics* podcast, Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's former press secretary, lamented the





decline of the church, noting that it was the churches through the World Council of Churches who were vital in the mobilisation of the campaign to reduce third world debt in the 1990s. Without them, we lose a vital lobby group for change worldwide.

And as the churches close, so our elected councillors our MSPs and MPs wake up to the fact that they might have to pick up the work and fill the gap.

Alternative Providers

Now this can be done of course. The church used to provide education and health care, and now the state does both of these things. And, if needed, the state could step in and run the foodbanks and the homeless shelters and the rest. Indeed it doesn't need to be the state, other third sectors organisations, other faith groups, could, and already do, offer the same to great effect.

So now I come to my question. What is the distinctive function of the church?

And first of all I argue that, whilst all this good stuff is what the church does, it is not I think the thing that makes it distinctive.

So let me have another go. Is the distinctive purpose of the church to give people lifestyle advice? To tell them what makes for a good life.

Well, again, yes and no.

There is absolutely no doubt that the church's progressive social mission did and does rescue people from habits and lifestyle choices that damage them and others. At its best the church has, and does, advocate for approaches to living and relationships which are healing and enriching and which lead to lives marked by faithfulness and integrity, hope and fulfilment.

That's the church at its best.

But we also recognise that throughout history those running the church have abused their power. And this misuse of power has led to individuals and groups being bullied and abused, ground down through manufactured guilt, or simply sidelined and ignored. I don't need to list out the sins of the church but double standards and hypocrisy come close to the top of the list.

That's the church at its worst.

So is lifestyle advice the distinctive function of the church?

Now, if we are talking about lifestyle advice, then there are other outfits that can do that for you. If you want to get fit you can join a gym and employ the expert services of their staff; if you want to lose weight there's Slimming World or Weight Watchers; if you want to break an addiction to alcohol or cigarettes there is support from self-help groups and the NHS.

So, again, whilst the church at its best has a lot of good lifestyle advice, it is not the thing that makes it distinctive.

So what is?

Distinctiveness

In my text from the letter to the Hebrews, in chapter 10 we read,

"... let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another ..."

It's clear that spurring one another on towards love and good deeds is, by any measure, a "good thing". But what is so important about meeting together as a group of Christians, as a church? What is it that we do when we meet together that makes the church distinctive? And why, therefore, is it vital that we, and other churches continue to meet?

It is because churches tell the story of Jesus Christ.

It's because every week we recall his life and work, his death and resurrection.

Why is that important?

Jesus Christ ¹

Well, at the human level, Jesus Christ said enduringly important things.

He taught, he told stories himself, which challenged the mighty and the powerful. Including the religious and political leaders and organisations of the day.

He warned how power – exercised by individuals or organisations – oppresses the small people.

He pointed out how money corrupts.

He took the side of the poor and the sidelined and the misfits.

He comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.

And it is the church that keeps the recollection of all that alive.

It is the church that tells the story of Jesus.

So this big, compromised, flawed human organisation – the church – has, at the human level, one big thing going for it.

It is in church that you hear Jesus' words.

And if you want to be in touch with all of that good stuff that he taught, then church is a good place, is the place, to be.

And there's more. In our divided and compartmentalised society churches work against the grain – they are counter cultural.

Our society loves sticking labels on people – young, old, rich, poor, Scottish, Welsh, Hearts, Hibs. Hull KR, Hull FC. Church is a place where, at the door, all your labels fall off.

And Church is a place which mixes people up. Perhaps the NHS is the only other institution that is as good as the church at mixing people up.

In church, certainly in this church, you meet and form friendships with people you would not otherwise meet.

You think about people other than yourself.

You reflect on the state of the world, not just your own little part of it.

You hear great music, wonderful stories which carry great meaning, you think about what is ultimately important in life.

So at that human level, church is the only place where, consistently, week by week, you will hear about Jesus Christ, what he taught, how he lived, how we might build a better world. And how we make sense of our place in this world.

Purpose of Life

But of course, we believe that, on a spiritual level, in church we actually encounter God, as he is in Jesus Christ, through his Holy Spirit. We believe he was not just "back then", but he is "here and now". And more, we believe that in listening to these stories, in reading God's Word, in prayer and in praise. We can encounter him, we can relate to him, the creator of the heavens and earth, the author of it all.

And that an encounter with God can turn into a relationship, and that this relationship can deepen, and in it we can find meaning and purpose and hope for our lives.

¹ Section based on Richard Holloway 'on Leaving the Church' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEIkAG5sBfM>

Great art, ingenious science can only get us so far. They can tell us how the world came to be made and what it is like now, but they cannot answer that fundamental question, “why is there something, rather than nothing?” (Remember the cake ²)

They cannot explain the bigger story that our lives are part of.

They cannot give us hope.

Our hope, the hope that we celebrate and reaffirm every week, rests on what Jesus Christ did for us, and what his life and teaching, his death and resurrection revealed to us about what God wills for us.

In Jesus we see what God wills for us.

Marcus Borg ³ put it this way:

“God wills our liberation, our exodus from Egypt. God wills our reconciliation, our return from exile. God wills our enlightenment, our seeing. God wills our forgiveness, our release from sin and guilt. God wills that we see ourselves as God’s beloved. God wills our resurrection, our passage from death to life. God wills for us food and drink that satisfy our hunger and thirst. God wills, comprehensively, our well-being—not just my well-being as an individual but the well-being of all of us and of the whole of creation. In short, God wills our salvation, our healing, here on earth. The Christian life is about participating in the salvation of God.”

So here is the good news:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

If we, or any church, stop proclaiming this gospel,

If we or any church, start throwing our weight around in un-Christlike ways, we may as well, no, that’s too weak, we should, simply shut up.

The Church is here to tell the story of Jesus. So –

every time we listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ being read in church,
every time we act out a nativity play,
every time we break bread to remember Christ’s death and celebrate his resurrection

– we are fulfilling our purpose as a church.

And so, the old hymn was actually about the distinctive work of the church,

“Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear.
Things I would ask him to tell me,
if he were here.

Scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea.
Stories of Jesus, tell them to me.”

Here is the good news of Jesus Christ, the great story, that we, as a church, tell every week:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Amen.

² John’s all-age address given earlier in the service, complete with picture of the cake, can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/4a2pnhpu>.

³ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*.