

Buzz Off!

Isaiah 58^{1-9a}; Psalm 112¹⁻⁹; 1 Corinthians 2¹⁻¹²; Matthew 5¹³⁻²⁰

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5¹⁶)

It is time to focus on growing the Church. If everyone here managed to find one other person to come to Church this year we would double the congregation in a 12 months; if that were to happen again in the following year the Church would be four times the size it is now; in the following year we would have to build an extension. That's how easy it is! Why won't people come?

One of the reasons is that there are many critics of the Church. It is accused of a number of things: hypocrisy; irrelevance; indifference (not caring); etc. As an institution it is weak, structurally uncertain and lacking moral conviction. Yet, at local level, it is wonderfully a collection of amateurs who struggle to follow Jesus and to love one another.

One of my favourite quotes has been:

Going to Church no more makes you a Christian than going to McDonald's makes you a Hamburger!

This week I learned a new one:

Going to Church no more makes you a Christian than standing in a garage makes you a car.

If you want to know what being a Christian is the readings today leave little room for doubt or uncertainty:

- ✦ Isaiah has the prophet pointing out the hypocrisy of the people **as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness** and then goes on to observe **you serve your own interests ... and oppress all your workers**. Isaiah then lists what is expected: **to loose the bonds of injustice; to let the oppressed go free; share your bread with the hungry; house the homeless; cloth the naked**. The result of all this is **then you shall call and the Lord will answer**. God's unconditional love for us must surely inspire unconditional love for others. Being a Christian isn't being a member of a self-absorbed self-improvement club, it changes us so that the needs of others become our needs.

- ✦ The Psalmist points out that God's blessing - in practical things - are for those who do what God says. Following on from Isaiah, the Psalmist says, **it goes well for those who are generous in lending and order their affairs with justice** and then that the faithful **have given freely to the poor**. I am quite certain that the rest of the Bible balances any notion of simply emptying our pockets carelessly, but it is the case that unless our attitude to money is converted we have some way to go: a heart open to God leads to a wallet open to those in need!
- ✦ Paul keeps us grounded in God as we know him in Jesus. He says that faith doesn't make sense! God's love is foolish. God's generosity is squanderous. God's perspective is different from a world perspective. What matters is **the power of God** and to accept that **we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us from God**. If you need to explain the difference God makes to us then something has gone wrong: who we are drowns out anything we say!
- ✦ Matthew picks up the *Sermon on the Mount* just after the *Beatitudes*. It begins by affirming us - **salt and light** are what they are. If a substance isn't sodium chloride it isn't salt, and if a naked flame is extinguished it ceases to be a light! You are a Christians because God says so! What Jesus says repeats what Paul has just said. Jesus then goes on to tell us that our Christian freedom means we are better at all the religious stuff than the people who do it out of habit or routine. **I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees you will never see the kingdom of heaven**. When we are inspired by rules we want to know how little we have to do to be accepted by God but when we are inspired by love and grace that end-point for the religious becomes the springboard for God's love and grace to be made known through us.

Christ sets us free - free enough to choose to be God's people. For Christ's sake stop think about yourself and think about how you can be beyond question God's love in practice for others.

My boss used to say about growing Churches as communities of hope and love: *When the flowers begin to open no-one has to tell the bees to come!* So, when we are done here today, buzz off and get on with it! The evidence of your faith and mine will be a community that is stronger, more loving, more robust and, yes, with more of us.