

222 In this together - 3

We have been reminded in recent Reflections that the Christian life, resting as it must on the foundation of a personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, is corporate as well as individual. How often have we heard the words, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian"? – perhaps even from our own mouths at times! But the answer to that is, "Yes, strictly speaking that is true, but the Lord places us among our fellow-Christians – that is, the Church – for a very good reason: that in it we may give, to Him and to each other, and may receive, from Him and from each other. A Christian who chooses to remain solitary is like a car engine running on only one of its cylinders – a great waste of potential and power.

We gather from the New Testament that the early years of the Christian Church were wonderful – vibrant, exciting and successful, and all this occurred against, in human terms, impossible odds; often the many critics of the Christians were simply left floundering (eg., Acts 4.13-22 / 17.6). As we ponder the state of the Church today and our involvement within it, a brief reminder of the habits of those first Christians is a great help. They were learning, feeling their way, coping with new and unexpected difficulties, lacking specifically Christian Scriptures, and yet through it all, they survived and prospered in the power, and under the guidance, of the Holy Spirit.

Please read two familiar key passages – Acts 2.41-47, and Acts 4, especially verses 31-37: what do we find from these verses? We start with, "those who gladly received his (Peter's) word were baptised" (Acts 4.41), a mere 3,000 people being involved that day in the receiving!

And then? Did those 3,000 go off muttering, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian?". Of course not! The Church, the body of their fellow-believers in the risen Christ, quickly became central and vital to their discipleship. "They continued steadfastly ... in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers ... Fear came upon every soul ... many sign and wonders were done by the apostles ... all things were had in common ... distribution to those in need ... continuing daily with one accord in the temple ... breaking bread from house to house ... gladness and singleness of heart ... praising God ... having favour with all the people ... the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved ... (from Acts 2.42-47) ... All were filled with the Holy Ghost ... they spake the word of God with boldness ... of one heart and of one mind ... all things in common ... with great power the apostles gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus ... great grace upon them all ... none lacked ... distribution according to need (from Acts 4.31-37).

The emphasis in those wonderful days was on solid belief in the Lord Jesus Christ being the Messiah; on the witnessed fact of Jesus' resurrection, an event which set the seal on His claims and deeds; and on the extraordinary boldness, power and enthusiasm of the apostles who kept saying, in all truthfulness, "We SAW!".

Inevitably things settled down, structures were established, the Gospels and Epistles were circulated, doctrines were defined and the first generation of Christians died off, often in martyrdom. Today we look back over 2,000 years of Christian history during which time the Holy Spirit has preserved the Gospel, the Bible and the Church, enabling people like us to hear and respond to the Good News for ourselves. The road has often been rocky, and in some parts of the world it still is, through apathy, persecution or the Church's wilful departure from Scripture.

But our Risen Lord Jesus is still the Head of the Church, the "body of Christ" (eg., Ephesians 1.22-23 / Colossians 1.18). He still loves it (eg., Ephesians 5.23-27), and still entrusts it with the task of proclaiming the Gospel in a sinful, needy world (and a wicked world too, as the dreadful terrorist murders in London this week so plainly demonstrate).

Next week we can explore afresh our God-given responsibilities to serve the Lord and one another within His Church, demonstrating as we do so two basic truths - all have a part to play and all are in this together! Some useful "homework" till then is to compare your local church fellowship with the scenes in early Acts: how are things different now, and why, and so? ...".

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