

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 13 WEEK 23 10 SEPTEMBER 2017

Religion in Britain is in decline. That's the conclusion of recent surveys. In one survey a majority of people said they were not Christian. In another, a majority said they did not identify with any religion – Christian, Muslim, Sikh or whatever. Those of us who've been church members for decades have experienced this at first hand. Did you see those cine films taken by Bill Barge of church events in the 1960s or 70s? All those church people piling into coaches on outings, or attending services, or filling the old church hall for parish meals!

As some of you know, I worshipped at S. John's from time to time in the 1970s and 80s. My family home was in Stapenhill. Fr Kenneth Cresswell was Vicar when I started coming. The regular Sunday congregation was much larger than it is now. Communion took ten minutes or more – partly because it was a longer walk up to the east end of church. There was a sizeable choir and a church cricket team.

Why the decline? Maybe because we're British, or Church of England, we tend to blame ourselves. We've changed the services – modern language instead of Book of Common Prayer. We've reordered the church. We've insisted baptism families attend church and receive that sacrament in one of the regular Masses. We've appointed fewer curates who can get around the parish and encourage people to come to church. We've lowered our standards, and give communion to people even if they've turned up late. We've failed to get people to come to confession.

Maybe, however, we shouldn't blame ourselves. The church is more welcoming and accessible than it has ever been. There are ample opportunities for worship. People who wish to learn about the Christian faith can join a Confirmation group or the twice yearly studies we have with S. Thomas' Methodist Church. There is a full programme of activities and teaching for young people. People are joining our church, though not in sufficient numbers to replace those who leave through the natural process of ageing. Numbers are declining because churchgoing is less and less what people choose to do on a Sunday or any other day. It probably never enters their thoughts.

What should our response be? The easiest thing is just to go on trying to do things the way we always have. But that's like telling a sick person who needs medicine, 'Just try carrying on as normal.' Fundamentally, I think we need a change of motivation. We shouldn't want more people to come to church because otherwise we'll close: we should want them to experience the fulfilment we have found in serious but joyful worship. We shouldn't engage in outreach because we want a bigger number to put on our annual returns: we should want people to hear the good news of

salvation. We shouldn't encourage stewardship in order to pay the bills, but in order that people can discover the blessing of generous giving.

There are practical things we can do. One church in our deanery includes the following question on application forms for baptism and marriage: 'Would you like to learn more about the Christian faith?' If people answer 'Yes', they are invited soon afterwards to a course on Christian Basics. That raises the question of who should lead such a course. 'The vicar or the curate,' may be an obvious answer, but should they then be relieved of some other duties in order to concentrate more on this front-line evangelism? There's a need for the clergy to do something about sharing duties with lay people. I'm not very good at this: I spent time this last week producing Harvest Supper tickets and taking a batch to a member of S. Thomas' who lives in Tutbury. I could have asked someone else to do it – I know people have in the past – or even better, an 'events group' or catering committee could have done it. This may be a trivial example, but it demonstrates the principle that a church works best when responsibilities are shared. We're back at S. Paul's image of the members of the body exercising their different functions. The sharing needs to be as wide as possible. In my ideal church, no person would be expected, subject to common sense, to have more than one job.

Common sense also demands that we do not let falling numbers make unreasonable demands on a small number of people. As an example, we have a number of very dedicated servers, but some of them find they are on duty almost every Sunday, sometimes plucked from the congregation ten minutes before the start of Mass. As the Worship Committee discussed last Thursday, either more people have to join the serving team, or the ritual will have to be adapted to be done by fewer bodies in the sanctuary. But it's not the end of the world. It's working with change rather than doggedly ignoring it.

The two pillars of the church's life are spreading the gospel and celebrating community. They stand together. Both of them support what I have said in this sermon, and indeed both of them can be detected in our gospel and New Testament readings today. The church in the first century was spreading the gospel, and there are no complaints I'm aware of in the New Testament of falling numbers. Of course the church then did not have the institutional life it has now. Regarding community, the reading from S. Matthew focuses on discerning what God's will is for the church, and how Jesus is present where two or three are gathered in his name. S. Paul tells the church members in Rome to 'love one another'. If our love reaches out into the wider community, I suspect decline might be reversed.