

Why Can't People Just Go to Church?

The Reverend Alan Robson

Sixty years ago, when I was a teenager, people used to go to church; a lot of people did; it was a normal sort of thing to do on a Sunday.

Some went regularly, others less so, and many were simply occasional attenders.

You didn't have to be a 'member' of the church: you didn't need to be baptised or confirmed; you just went because you felt like it. It was a bit like deciding to go out for a meal: the sort of thing people do, some regularly, others from time to time. And as at the pub or restaurant, people felt comfortable in church. They were welcome; they knew what was on offer, for the fare was much the same every time - and (let's be honest!) it was quality stuff: Book of Common Prayer and, very often, fine music, together with (more often than is commonly supposed) an intelligent and instructive sermon of some fifteen to twenty minutes.

The services they went to were matins or evensong. There was something of a sociological divide between the two, the wealthier element at matins and the generality of folk at evensong, much the most popular service, partly because of its delightful structure and content, partly because of the relaxed evening hour. There was also an early morning service, the '8 o'clock communion'. This was more thinly attended, largely because it was for 'members only'. One went to this service specifically to "make ones communion". It was very much an individual thing; there was very little to suggest a celebration of togetherness as a body of Christ.

Most people did not think of themselves as 'being' the church; church was where you might 'go' on a Sunday, just as you might go to the cinema on Saturday, though for different reasons.

That's how it was with my parents. Occasionally they went to evensong, and took me with them.

As a teenager I came to love evensong and the relaxed and friendly atmosphere surrounding it. Eventually, it led me to confirmation and, ultimately, ordination.

In the course of my lifetime all this has changed. The communion service (Eucharist) has come to occupy the premier place in the church's worship, and I confess I have been as zealous as anyone in promoting it. It is now the central, and in many parishes the only, Sunday service but I have come to believe it has had some profoundly negative consequences. The first is that people no longer 'go to church' as they once did. The sacrament of communion is for 'members only', the wholly committed, the baptised and confirmed. Non-members, of course are welcome, but the casual or occasional attender today faces major embarrassment and even humiliation.

How are they to know that we turn to face the gospel reading? How do they cope with a sudden outbreak of embracing and handshaking? What to do when everyone else goes to the communion rail? And if they choose to go they are marked down as 'outsiders' for they are denied the bread and wine.

Outsiders they will remain until they get themselves baptised and confirmed, which in turn means they must subscribe to the whole package, Bible, creeds and all - and what a package!

It has been argued that the Eucharist must be the central service because this is the only service our Lord actually required of us. 'Do this, he said, in remembrance of me'. Yes, but they were in a synagogue or Temple at the time, not 'in church'. They were having supper together, as they often did, and Jesus was saying grace' over bread and wine, giving thanks for creation and redemption, the way Jews do to this day on the eve of the Sabbath and other special occasions.

One of the great strengths and attractions of Judaism is that all the most important 'liturgical' observances are domestic and happen in the home. That is where, originally, the Eucharist belonged, and what pain and grief we might have been spared over this issue of 'priesthood' had the Eucharist continued as it had begun, at home, with father or mother presiding! (There's an idea for the liturgical revisers to get their teeth into!)

'The centrality of the Eucharist, with the corresponding emphasis on committed membership, has transformed us into an increasingly exclusive sect as opposed to an inclusive religious fellowship. The open main-line services (matins and evensong) of the old days met the needs not only of the committed believers but of the many 'not sure', somewhat agnostic, even atheistic, but who found something there which was of value, and therefore 'dropped in ' from time to time. That was our particular strength and attraction: anyone could be C of E.

Much the saddest consequence of the new situation is that we have polarised the religious life of our society. The Church has effectively excluded the uncommitted. We have done this quite knowingly, responding to the observation that congregations are dwindling with the assertion that those who remain are 'more committed', as if total commitment were the only valid religious stance. (The evangelical wing, less given to sacramentalism might have compensated for this but, sadly, their worship is even more overtly aimed at conversion and total commitment.) Current teaching and practice, both catholic and evangelical, imply that that it has to be all or nothing. The uncommitted who used to go to church quite comfortably can no longer do so.

These latter now increasingly proclaim themselves, often quite aggressively, as atheists, in response to the committed believers who can be so noisily aggressive about being 'Christian'.

This seldom happened in my youth. We were all more sensible and relaxed about religion. At its heart religion is about the meaning and values of life, presenting a variety of responses to the realities of life and its demands. The God - orientated response of Christianity is capable of a multitude of interpretations;" it is open to almost infinite spectrum of belief or unbelief. The Church of England developed a genius for accommodating this vast spectrum, welcoming all ministering to all. My generation, with our well- intentioned devotion to the Eucharist, has bought this to an end.

Can we rescue the situation? It may be too late. We are not going to recover the former status of matins or evensong. We are committed now to the centrality of the Eucharist, but we could at least open up the communion to all, making no conditions about membership. We must let people just 'go to church' again.

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