

Christ Church Brunswick
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Mark 6: 30-34

SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD

There is a common attitude in this day and age, and particularly among the young, that says; “Yeah - I believe there is a God. I believe in God, but I can’t see why I need the Church. It is irrelevant in this 21st century – after all it’s an organisation set up by humans and doesn’t really do much for me.”

“Jesus? Yes Jesus was good. And He is supposed to be the main product the Church has to sell. But you wonder about that sometimes because there is so much irrelevant stuff going on. I don’t need it.

Nor do I need the Church to tell me about Jesus. All I need to know I can find in the Bible.

Anyhow I believe in God not necessarily in Jesus.”

This effectively reduces Jesus to a do-gooder, respected but not all that important.

And here is the root of the problem.

If you don’t see Jesus as the incarnation of God – well, you needn’t believe anything, neither the Church nor the Scriptures or anything the Church says or does has any real authority. Take it or leave it.

I say it again: if I say it every time I get up into this pulpit, it is not enough.

Belief in Jesus as the incarnation of God (confusingly called “Son of God”) is the paradigm.

It is the belief on which all Christian belief depends.

It is the fact that changes everything.

When we’re sure of this, a door opens and in faith we step into a world of understanding, of knowing for sure, and of following. We have an authority, we have a leader, we have a shepherd.

Our sceptic might say, “How can you say that the Church is the creation of Jesus - just look at its history.”

Well, yes, it has a chequered history especially in medieval times, and maybe up to this present time in somewhat quieter ways.

But the Church is made up of people being people.

Its life reflects too often just what is going on in society. What is not acceptable to us may have been acceptable to people at another time. Who knows how the Church of the present day will be judged by future generations. This is surely progress because it means we’re moving to better things.

I know for a fact that people find the politics of the Church tedious and off-putting. Somebody always criticising someone else – some like this – some like that in the worship. The Guild has been using the Tennis club's urn and they burnt it out. Whose urn is it anyway?

I remember one parish that even had a Croquet club. That was almost the beginning of the Third World War. What's all this got to do with Jesus?

If you want the ultimate example of this kind of problem listen to this.

Have you heard of the "Ship of Fools"?

It's a world-wide organisation and its stated mission is to improve worship and the life of the church.

I'll leave you to judge whether they are going about it the right way. Is it useful to the Church - to its worship and its life?

One of their techniques is called the "Mystery Worshipper".

He or she attends worship in a parish and then publishes his or her opinion of it. They have a web site - you can look it up.

Oh, yes - we've had a visit - last year. I don't know whether it was male or female but with due respect to the ladies I am going to assume it was a woman. The Vicar was the celebrant and preacher. There was no Deacon - well., naughty, naughty me. My excuse was that I was recovering from a fairly rugged time in hospital.

There was no Deacon – just a young man dressed as a sub-deacon (apparently he wasn't a real sub-deacon).

The congregation was small - forty including the choir in a building that will hold 150. The sides-woman greeted her but she had to pick up her own books. Nobody else welcomed her and only one person smiled at her as she walked up the aisle. The other people, as they came in, talked to their friends, and as the service time came closer the noise increased.

During the sermon someone was having a conversation, she thinks, with himself.

The service was traditional BCP (reserved) with no smiling. Everything was done by rote - even the hymn singing was morbid - hardly anyone joined in. The choir made a pathetic attempt at Byrd's Four Part Mass. It was as if they hadn't rehearsed it.

Notices were given before the sermon and were uninteresting to the visitor.

The sermon lasted fourteen minutes. The Vicar's words seemed rather archaic (he was probably using good English). There was a funny story but our visitor couldn't see what it had to do with the sermon. She liked the beauty of the building – it uplifted her.

The things that annoyed her most were the chattering during the sermon and poor music. Afterwards she introduced herself to an elderly woman - over 90 - who took her to the parish hall. The tea was alright but there were only bought biscuits to eat.

Summing up: there was nothing to make her want to return! The liturgy was sloppy and a poor imitation of a traditional high mass. The hymns were painfully slow and badly chosen. The choir did not inspire. She felt an unwelcome intruder and there was no discernable parish life to attract her.

Well, we have been chastised. There might be something that we can learn from this, but isn't this all a bit uncharitable and irrelevant. It is easy to criticise. Of course you realize what this catalogue of disapproval is? It is simply the rather jaded opinion of one person. We can all have opinions.

Billy Graham told about a woman who came to him and asked him; "Where can I find a church that meets my needs – where can I find the perfect church?" His reply was: "I don't know madam – but when you join it, it will no longer be perfect."

The Church for all its weaknesses is still the embodiment of the faith, the instrument of Jesus.

Some would put it another way. They would say: "Yes I believe in God, but I don't believe in organised religion, I can't see any reason why I should go and listen to out-of-date music and boring sermons."

OK, if they can believe in God and accept Jesus, they ought to look again at the Gospel. In the passage before the one that was read this morning, Jesus had sent His disciples out in pairs, to do his work - to preach and to heal, and He must have made a time for them all to meet again. Do I detect organisation, organised religion on the instruction of Jesus?

In St Matthew's Gospel chapter 16 we read about Jesus questioning the disciples about their belief in Him. He asked them: "Who do men say that I am?"

Well, some say this and some say that: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter the ever ready spokesman said: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus said yes! - "You are Peter" (which means a rock). Then Jesus turns to what Peter said: "and upon this rock I will build my Church." – that is the rock - Peter's statement: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The Lord founded His Church on a belief – a recognition – not on a man.

"On this rock I will build my Church".

Jesus clearly set up the Church which, after His death and resurrection, went out to do His work - organised.

So how can a person say: "I believe that Jesus was the Son of God, but I don't believe in organised religion."? It's a straight out contradiction.

Who does this person think has preserved the Gospel record and taught the multitude for two thousand years, if not the Church – organised religion?

Who is it that teaches the children generation after generation? Who is it that makes missionaries of us all, to take the Word to the community.
 Who represents the Faith with its presence in the community and its voice in society?
 It is no individual, I can tell you. It is organised religion fulfilling Jesus' commands to go into all the world and teach the Gospel.

And where there is need for comfort and reassurance - say when there is a hideous motor accident killing half a dozen teenagers, where do they look - if not the Church. Nobody else knows what to say - there's lots of good will, but little consolation. The Church responds with the true consolation: "I am the resurrection and life says the Lord. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. The Church brings the message of God's love to the scene. That's why they look to it.

But of course to you and me it is much more than a custodian of the faith. It is where we go regularly for God's grace in the Word and the sacraments. It is where we are fed. Just as home is a place where we find sustenance physically - around the dinner table, so the Church is the place where we are fed spiritually at the Lord's table. One is as important as the other.

If our sceptic doesn't believe in organised religion, from where does he think he got his information about the Son of God?
 Or we may ask, what does he believe anyhow - something he devised himself?

My mother, of blessed memory, at the age of eighty seven responded to an invitation to talk to year 12 students at a prominent Roman Catholic boys school in Melbourne, on the subject of Anglicanism.
 It was all part of their general religious studies. One question she was asked was: "What do you have to do to be a good Vicar's wife?" And her answer was: "You have to love the Church."

I've thought about that a lot. It was spot on.
 But if it is the first requirement for a good Vicar's wife surely it ought to be the requirement for us all.
 There's not enough of it about.

In today's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples were busy dealing with a big crowd on the shores of Galilee. There was some sort of a meal on but they didn't even have enough time to eat. They had just come back from their missionary journeys. So Jesus decided to leave, and go to a place where they could be quiet - to contemplate - to think about all that had happened.

Verse 30 of the sixth chapter of St Mark says: "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." They were very excited - bursting with enthusiasm at the wonder of it all.

You often see it in a new priest when he's in his first parish. He's a bit starry eyed. He's having great successes - so many in his confirmation class, successful meetings - the Vestry even approves him altering the Church a bit. The joy of meeting people in their homes - the great parish occasions he's had - church full.

It's all good this, but it's a bit misleading.

The understanding that comes with experience will tell him that the great times may not be in big crowds, or people being agreeable, but in quieter, more intimate occasions, and maybe even when people are being disagreeable.

The disciples enthusiasm was all very good in its way but it did rather cloud the stark reality of their experience. The realisation that they were being allowed into the mystery of God's workings - healing the sick, teaching and converting, baptising. They had to have time to let the real message sink in - the message of God's grace being exercised through them.

There's a lesson in that for the Church - both clergy and lay people - today.

Jesus got the disciples into a boat and they headed for the far shore of Galilee - "a lonely place", where they could be by themselves.

But this quiet time - this retreat- was not to be.

"But many saw them going and ran ahead and got there first." The word went quickly around the villages that Jesus was heading for this place, so they joined in.

St Mark records: "As He went ashore He saw a great throng and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things."

I wonder if Jesus stood on the corner of Swanson and Flinders Streets today at peak hour, whether He wouldn't think the same thing.

I rather think He would.

Or if Jesus read The Age and saw the political wrangles that are forever going on, would He have compassion on the politicians and journalists, and see them as sheep without a shepherd - I'm sure He would, as He would see the whole un-churched community.

We are ever looking for a shepherd and there are many false shepherds about; Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

When there's an election people will vote for this party or that. It isn't just better government they are looking for - they want a messiah. There isn't really one available so they manufacture their own by building up a political leader with a lot of virtues he hasn't really got, and voting, not for the real guy, but for the image they have created.

Where do we find our Shepherd - the one who will take us down the right path? The Lord is the Good Shepherd, but the Church is the instrument that will help us find Him.

So - love your Church - forgive your Church – look to your Church with a charitable heart - and you will find Him - the Good Shepherd – the true Saviour.