

Being a Christian

Psalm 26:1-9; Romans 12:9-21

I read recently of a man who was asked by a friend, "Why be a Christian?" The man had never really thought about it before, having been brought up as a Christian, and had only found himself beginning to think about it when he was considering whether Christianity was true or not. Was it true that humanity was destined to share God's own unutterable happiness, and this was the purpose of life. Or it was not true, and he had better leave the Church sharpish. The man replied to his friend, "Because it is true." But this did not satisfy the friend at all. "But what's the point of being a Christian? What's the purpose of it?...What do you get out of it? What does it do for you?" Christianity is there primarily to point us to God, Who is the point of everything. However, if there is a point to God, and what we believe, then what are the consequences of our believing in the way we live our lives. If being a Christian doesn't have any effect on the way we live, then what is the point of it? If faith points us towards God, then what is God pointing us towards in what we say and think and do every day? Christianity has to make a difference, or it has no point. It has to blend believing with doing.ⁱ

This understanding of faith is as old as time. In the Book of Psalms David writes that we are to walk in integrity and faithfulness, and to sing in worship. What affects us on the inside prompts us to reveal something on the outside.

Being a Christian affects our interior life and our exterior life. Our thoughts and motivations shape our words and actions.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul also sets out to define what a Christian is like. He spells out some of the ways a Christian should live. I've always had a fondness for this passage as it was the text

of the second sermon I ever preached. At an early stage in my own Christian formation, it pointed me in the right direction, and I have been trying, and often failing, to live up to it ever since.

What does it say to you?

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” An injunction for private life and for public morality in just about every walk of life. Is your love genuine, or feigned? Do you walk away from the bad and wrong things, and have a firm grip on what is right?

In Parliamentary circles we have heard a lot about committees on Standards in Public Life and standards in general, and tut tut, or more, at the antics of a minority of politicians. The United States is currently gripped by wave after wave of indictments served on former President Trump and his supporters where all forms of behaviour will be under scrutiny in the months ahead. We consistently seek and expect a high standard of behaviour from those in high office, but I often wonder if we set up a standards committee in Morningside, and other churches, how most of us would fare.

Some may know that amongst the original responsibilities of Kirk Sessions was a disciplinary one where minister and elders kept a close eye on the standards and behaviour of parishioners. I remember once reading through Session minutes from the C19th and before and was astonished by the number of people who were ‘compeared’ to appear before the Kirk Session and answer charges about swearing, riotous behaviour, non-attendance at Church, and what was described as ‘pre-nuptial fornication’. There was a lot of it. Those long, cold, winter’s nights. We assume the past was golden age of fine Christian living. The truth was it was no better, and no worse, than behaviour is today. And the same was true in the days of the early Church when Paul wrote to set out what being a Christian meant.

So, love genuinely, and avoid the bad things. Be affectionate. Be hopeful in the good times, and patient in the bad times. Keep praying. Support people who are struggling materially. Be hospitable. Of course, we should, of course we must, but hearing this list read out, how are you doing? Some might think it a counsel of perfection, up there with the Ten Commandments, but in truth there is nothing that is beyond human reach in what Paul writes. This is to be the culture of the Church. These are to be the regular, daily, behaviour patterns of the people of the Church. This is what it means to be a Christian.

At a time when society at large is feeling beaten down by economic worries, and the behaviour of people in high, and lower, places, here is what the Church and the Christian people have to live up to and to offer to the communities where we live. It is a call for all of us, however good or bad we think we are at being Christian, to live differently.

Against a background culture which can often seem selfish and self-regarding, fractious and petty, Paul calls Christians to embody virtues and practices that promote life-giving relations: genuine love, mutual regard, humility, solidarity, peace, and harmony. It is a way of being and acting that cares not only for members of the faith community but also for the wider society, particularly the strangers in our midst. The Christian tradition has called this practice hospitality.ⁱⁱ

Hospitality is a distinctive mark of the church which was born out of hospitality and spread because of hospitality. It is the practice by which we stand or fall. It's not only about welcoming newcomers and doing charitable actions. Hospitality goes beyond charity and can become an act of justice. Hospitality as charity offers crumbs from our tables; hospitality as justice offers a place at the table. Hospitality as charity supports food banks and clothing stores and providing goods for people setting up their first homes. Hospitality as justice challenges governments and banks and large corporations and people in power to address why poverty and hunger and inequality

exist in the first place, and call them, alongside ourselves, to change the way the world has become. There is a hard edge to hospitality, to being Christian, that some will be called to witness to as they practise what it means to be a Christian today.

But not all are called to people the barricades. Many are called to be Christian in the gentler, but still subversive in some ways, actions of welcome. Growing churches often report that those newcomers who come regularly, and maybe join, do so because they found in the faith community a spirit that attracted them by its power of love and hospitality, not just in the way the members treated visitors, but also in the way they treated *each other*.ⁱⁱⁱ A religion will be what its adherents make of it.^{iv}

There's a lot in the September issue of the church magazine. I was drawn in particular to an article written about last month's afternoon tea. It was a great event, it required a huge amount of organisation and commitment, and its impact remains astonishing. What I particularly liked was the way the magazine article ended: *"Thank you Morningside Parish Church once again for the cheerful embrace of your friendship and hospitality..."*

The cheerful embrace of friendship and hospitality. You'll have had your tea in Morningside, and it's a blooming good one! But beyond the food and drink, being a Christian is about that cheerful embrace of friendship and hospitality. It shows kindness and offers a welcome to friend and stranger. It is in truth a form of evangelism. It's a lot to live up to, as Paul makes it clear in his Letter to the Romans, but when we get it right, and we often do, faithful people show and generously show kindness to one another. Mission flows. Hospitality abounds, and the good news of Jesus is spread in word and deed.

As Paul challenges us: "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord."

This is what we do. This is who we are. This is being a Christian today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Timothy Radcliffe, What is the Point of Being a Christian? Pps1-2

ⁱⁱ Eleazar S Fernandez, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, p18

ⁱⁱⁱ Rochelle A Stackhouse, *ibid*

^{iv} Brian D McLaren, The Great Spiritual Migration, p14