

There is a commonly held notion that the further one goes to opposite extremes the closer things start to appear: set out in every more conflicting directions and eventually one comes full circle. 'Extremes meet' as the proverb goes. So some claim that hard left and far right political regimes are basically the same etc. As a description of the real world it's wrong of course, but it is true that those on opposing sides of an argument may well have the same concerns and the same questions, just different answers. So I think it's fair to say that all politicians aim to improve the lot of their people. Some will think this can be achieved by bettering public services, protecting the vulnerable and so on; some will think this is best achieved by giving people as much responsibility for their own welfare as possible; and some will think this is best achieved by making themselves and their friends rich. The proposed answers are very different, but the starting question— what is best for the people— is the same.

So, take clergy and atheists- two extreme views, usually, but there is a question both ask. We come from very different standpoints, there is almost no overlap on the Venn diagram, at least one would hope so, but still the extremes meet to ask a question. Both humanists and priests want to know:

What is the point of a Christian?

It's a good question. I hope you've asked it of yourself, at least once, and are happy with the answer.

What is the point of a Christian?

Now the prevalent view in the Church of England, or at least those who are currently holding the purse strings and the megaphone, is that the purpose of a Christian is to tell the good news, and thus, spread the gospel and make more Christians. If your church isn't making ten members from the one it's been given then it's not doing its job. Church growth is what the church is about. Mission, conversion, evangelism. Now partly this is panic as church attendance in England continues to decline; partly this is the recent ascendancy of one faction in the church, now dominating the hierarchy and episcopacy. But, no smoke without fire; though fear of decline and church politics may be factors, that Christians are there to spread the gospel is undeniable

Jesus himself, just before he ascended into heaven said as much

*'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'*

the great commission. Or, open the book of Acts and the apostles are always standing up in unlikely places, giving speeches and the Lord then adding to their number those who are being saved; growing the church.

Yes, of course, the point of a Christian is to evangelise, to bring others to Christ. But is that it? Is that what our faith is all about, is it at heart a sort of pious Ponzi scheme, a spiritual pyramid selling? You make disciples who then go and make some more who then go and make some more... and on till the whole world is signed up to the Christian chain letter, the eight-ball epistle?

Back for a moment to the *Acts of the Apostles*. There is a clue right there in the name of the book... it is a book about... apostles: translated; messengers, synonym; evangelists. Naturally *Acts of the Apostles* is going to concentrate on the spreading of the word, because that's what Apostles do, it's what it says on the tin. But look elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul's letters rarely mention the need to evangelise: they tend to assume small communities of the faithful, waiting for the end of the world. The letters wrestle with contentious issues among the faithful, glory at what God has done and wonder what it all means, suggest how to be a community of Christians in a pagan world, ponder the best way to prepare for Christ's return in glory.

Whereas one of the points of being a Christian is to evangelise, it's not the only one. After all, in theory, you could reach a point where everyone has heard the good news: and then what? There have been times, hundreds of years perhaps, in England, say, where pretty much everybody was, notionally at least, Christian, Everybody, more or less, went to church, everybody, certainly had heard the gospel proclaimed. Did the church pack up and say 'job done, nobody left to evangelise, that's us finished'? Of course not, It got on with other jobs that are just as much a part of Christian—praying, baptising, worshipping, building hospitals and schools, caring for the poor and the sick.

One of the points of being a Christian is to evangelise; it's not the only one. We're porcupines of points, and it's more than possible to be a true faithful and devoted Christian without ever bringing anyone else to faith. It's unlikely, because Christianity, properly done, is something that is highly contagious, but it's possible. You can be a

saint-in-waiting and yet have never introduced anyone of your fellows to their personal saviour.

So, we have other points. Let's sample some of what Jesus says, after all, if he said it we probably should pay attention.

*You are the salt of the earth.*

*The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.*

Christians are to be the irritant that makes the oyster produce the pearl, Christians are to be busy changing the world from the inside, Christians are to give the world it's savour. Note in the second parable yeast doesn't become the whole bread, but mixing several metaphors at once in the dough, we're thinking about a very small amount of yeast hitting above its weight.

What else?

*You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

So, you are to be a good example, someone your heavenly parent could be proud of, someone whose behaviour and witness causes others to praise God.

*Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

Christians must care for those in need— love their neighbour as themselves. The words of the Christian scriptures are full of reprimands for those who do not care for the vulnerable and praise for those who do: there are no such parallel passages for proselytising.

Those are a selection of other things Christians are called to be and do. There are many others, but alas not enough minutes left in this sermon. I can almost feel your disappointment. There is one point I have yet to mention, however, one that towers over all. Jesus reaches the point in an upstairs room with his disciples, those who will later go out to the ends of the earth to spread his word, those who will have the starring roles in the Acts of the Apostles, those who will dedicate their lives and deaths to the Lord's teaching. Jesus looks at his disciples and says:

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.*

Near the beginning of this sermon I quoted the great commission.

*'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations'*

It doesn't end with that sentence though. Jesus continues:

*'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.'*

That is how a Christian is made, through the rebirth of the waters of baptism. Audrey will be baptised in a matter of minutes, she will be welcomed into Christ's church, she will start her journey of Christian pilgrimage. She is, I think we can safely say, too young to understand what's been said in this sermon. Her parents and godparents are not and it is they, together with all of us here, who will pass on the lessons of the faith to her as she grows, show her over the coming years what this ceremony near the beginning of her life was for, what the point of being a Christian is.

So, in summary, just in case they weren't listening. One of the points of being a Christian is to evangelise. Another is to change the world. Yet another is being an example for others; another caring for all as we would for Jesus himself. And the overarching, overwhelming, overall point of our faith, is to love.

There may be times when one part of being a Christian is more to the fore than the others: early days are different from later days; times of decline will require a different emphasis to times of plenty. But without that one point— to love— all our doings are as nothing.

The church is, yes a recruitment office. It is also a hospital, a refuge and a lighthouse; a school, a home and a temple. If love is not the foundation it is made of straw and built on sand.

Love one another.