

It is one of the more curious habits of humankind that we delight in telling ourselves things that we would like to be true even when they're not. It's almost as if, if we say these things, if we put them into words then they will become true, the more we chant our cliché mantras, the more they will become convincing, however unlikely it is what we are expressing may actually be. You will have seen it a lot lately, but it's not just politicians in election week. Our popular parlance is littered with such little aphorisms, brave nuggets of platitudinous wisdom fluttering defiantly in the face of truth.

An example or two will illustrate.

'I'm sure they know what they're doing'. Applied to the busy milling of a colony of ants say or a beehive, then fair enough, but applied to governments say, or authority figures, secular or religious it is of course a patent absurdity. If they actually knew what they were doing they'd stop doing it pretty sharply. At least while we were looking.

'This is going to hurt me more than it will hurt you', is a good example, 'everybody looks bad on their passport photograph' another.

'Life begins at forty'. Now there's a phrase desperately trying to keep a straight face, biting its lip trying not to giggle.

'You won't get there any faster'. 'I want never gets' 'We will be with you shortly; please hold the line'. Hmm. And here's a real cracker, a really popular porky: 'You don't need to go to Church to be a Christian'.

Now it doesn't really matter if somebody does decide that four decades from birth their life starts. Probably the worst that could happen is they develop some new enthusiasms, start wearing slightly too youthful fashions, put go-faster stripes on their car or became otherwise embarrassing. Or even more embarrassing in my case. It wouldn't really matter. But there may be some risk if we invite vacuous platitudes into our spiritual lives; phrases like 'You don't need to go to Church to be a Christian'; there may be something more at stake there than losing our sense of cool to middle-age spread.

But let's start by entertaining for the minute, the notion that one can be Christian without going to Church. If one can it is, in fact, very, very, very difficult. The history of our faith is spotted with a tiny number of men and women who renounced the

world of the social and waltzed off into the wilderness up mountains, onto deserts, down caves, into forests or even in the really bonkers cases up pillars. These are all, I am sure you will agree, rather extreme ways of getting out of going to church. Most of these adventurers, those who weren't eaten by wild animals or didn't starve to death or die of exposure, came back. Some of our most venerated Saints, St Benedict say or St John Chrysostom, hit out on their own searching for Christ in the emptiness before realising that where we actually find him is in other people. When Elijah, on his own dejected up the mountain meets God and hears the still small voice, that voice sends him back down the mountain, back into the madding crowd.

Now for the vast majority of those who say you don't need to go to Church to be a Christian this means not running off into the desert, but something closer to having a lie in on a Sunday morning, something closer to 'there are more important things for me to do, I don't want to wake up, I don't like the hymns and the sermons are boring, though obviously not anyone who's been here is going to say that. But let's be charitable, and assume that when someone says 'you don't need to go to church to be a Christian' they sincerely intend to devote themselves to searching for and serving our Lord. Can it work?

Just as the vast majority of those who took to the wilderness foundered on the rocks of harsh realities, so there are innumerable dangers in 21st century life for those little boats that cast off from the mother ship: there are the rapids of doubt, the whirlpools of false beliefs, the treacherous currents of popularity and riches, the siren call of success, the sands of worldly cares and worst of all, the sharp submerged rocks of indifference. How very easy it is to bravely cast out in your boat only to find that the tides that seemed nothing from the big ship are too strong and rather than riding the high seas with your sails full and billowing, you're stuck in the mud, hardly having moved at all.

When the church seems patriarchal and authoritarian, or insipid and wishy-washy, out of touch or stuck in the past- and it is all those things and then some- it may be very tempting to think we can make our own way. This is the lie of post-modernism, the seduction that we can make up our own truths, that all truths are equally valid. Now to believe that each person should be free to believe what they will may be a good thing. We can probably agree on that. It is a good thing. But it doesn't mean that we are all right and that what each of us believes actually is true.

We may all make our own interpretations of the truth, or rather we like to flatter ourselves that we do, but we do not make the truths. However hard it may be to acknowledge, a church- fallible and sometimes wrong herself- is there to suggest to us, hopefully gently but sometimes more forcefully, that there is something bigger out there, something more than ourselves and our opinions.

At the very least Church acts as a refueling depot, a sort of holy motorway service station where you can stop to revive and, crucially, to check the map. The food may not be cordon bleu, it may be overpriced and sometimes the place is full of people you'd rather not share a table with, but if you don't pull over, if you don't stop, you'll run out of fuel, turn off at the wrong junction, fall asleep at the wheel.

So that's the practicalities argument. Put succinctly, keeping up the momentum, keeping on the right path and avoiding the dangers are much more difficult on your own. Being a good person outside of organised religion may be possible but being a Christian without a church is very, very difficult.

But there's an even bigger snag and it's this: Splendid isolation is not the vision Jesus has for his followers.

Jesus described his relationship with his followers as that of the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd leaves the 99 on the mountainside to fetch the one individual sheep that has strayed, but when he brings it back he puts it in the fold with the rest. Sheep belong, bumping and jostling in the fold, together.

Elsewhere we morph from sheep and a shepherd into vines and branches. Jesus did not, note, conceive of his followers as isolated grape plants; he did not envisage neat rows of solitary if pious potted plants. We are branches of the one vine, and this speaks not only of a mystical, hypothetical or philosophical oneness, but of a very real interdependence, a reality lived in, with and grafted to Christ and to our brothers and sisters. To be Christian is to be part of the body of Christ, and the body of Christ no more consists of self-contained individual cells floating round on their own than you or I. As St Paul says

*'The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."'*

Now I must stress two things. First, I'm not suggesting that you can't be a good person without coming to church, or those who never warm a pew are not loved by

God or that not coming to church guarantees you an afterlife spent howling as the demons heap on the brimstone. Not what I'm saying. And second, I need to say, as we've all learned this last year or so, coming to Church is not necessarily about physical location. There is an underlying mental state of recognition of our interdependence, our sisterhood in Christ, that manifests as coming to Church. Many of the most dedicated members of St Mary's congregation, however, many of its most regular worshippers rarely if ever now enter this building, they do not in that sense 'come to church' because illness means they cannot. For our home communicants, Church goes to them. And thus they are still very much part of this church, part of the universal church, being Christians, still coming to church.

Even if some of the players now have to sit on the side lines, Christianity is still a team sport not a solo endeavour, it is Crystal Palace not Ellen MacArthur. Whether we like it or not, we have to be in this together.

Of course, Christians have an almost constant urge to split and splinter; but they also have a strange tendency to come together. Fissile by nature we are also united by a foundation in togetherness. The pulsing heartbeat of our faith is the Eucharist, an event that is always communal; the Last Supper was not a shrink-wrapped individual portion, it was a shared melting-pot meal with many round the table, and a real mixed bunch of dinner guests at that. The word 'church' means congregation and congregation means other Christians. To be a Christian is to be community.

So, in terms of sheer practicalities, the day in day out 'doing it', trying to be a Christian without Church is a non-starter. But even if it was easy, even if skipping Church made the Christian life a breeze, it is not what Jesus wanted for his followers. Ignore *his* wishes, and quite how Christian can you be.