

Call to be the Church of Christ

Introduction:

Our church buildings have been closed for seven weeks and we miss the familiar settings, the sense of being in a special place where the people of God have worshipped for centuries, and especially where we experience close fellowship with people we know and love – Zoom for all its benefits is not the same.

Yet our faith remains the same, founded on Christ and the experience of his love, grace, mercy, truth and peace in our lives, and which is not restricted to buildings.

We listen to Peter's call to worship – 2:4-5

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The call is not to come to church, but come to Christ and be his church. This is a helpful focus as we are isolated from our church communities.

The Temple:

Religion is popular and centres on buildings. No! says Peter - 2:5a; we are the temple; Christ's presence is in his people. As the sign on the church door says: 'He is not here. He is Risen!'

In Rushden, I remember Shirley Scott coming with her class of 5-6 year olds and politely knocking on the church door - "Can we come in and see the church?" "No" I replied. Shirley was somewhat confused, but then I explained, "They're not here." This is just the building where the church meets.

God wants to build us into his church. But this is not so popular - no longer is this religion confined to the safety of a church building.

The call is to come to Christ and not to the building - when we come to Christ we are built into a vibrant, living, loving people; we have a

living relationship with Jesus; we know his love, power and direction through the Spirit; and we share that love and encouragement with each other.

Come to Christ, not to the building. Come to worship, not to a service or two. Come to live with and for Christ. Now this is revolutionary and challenging.

But this is particularly important when we are isolated from one another.

Of course we will grow stronger when we are once more together, but for the time being we can rejoice at the connections that modern technology brings, and our sharing the bread together as the scattered body of Christ.

The Priests:

Religion is popular and centres on buildings, which are run by rectors, vicars, ministers, elders and deacons.

If you've got a problem - go and see the minister - she or he will administer God to you, when you need him; say a prayer for you, or offer some advice. No! says Peter - who are the priests? - We are! It is true that our clergy have a special calling from God, but we each can approach God, we can bring God's word and love to a needy, waiting world - 2:5ab; 9-10.

Now this is not popular - an active rather than passive religion; a battleship rather than a cruise liner. We are called to bring God to the world and the world to God - in our own lives and through them to others. We share what we have experienced of God's goodness, and pray for a world in need - in need of forgiveness, light, meaning, value, love, purpose, and at this time especially hope.

This is particularly helpful when we cannot see our own rector or vicar each week – we are reminded of the good news that through the cross of Jesus we can each approach God in our own homes or wherever we are. It is in fact our calling to pray and to speak and so to build Christ's church. We remember that there is nowhere in God's creation that God is not present.

Peter doesn't say, come to church, sing hymns and songs, listen to the preacher, God will be pleased with you. He doesn't say that! 2:5 let yourself be used to serve and to offer.

The Sacrifice:

Religion is popular and centres on buildings; it is looked after by priests, who administer God to people who need him; and in return we give something. There is always an offering. Who has heard of a church without an offering or an appeal? - or at least that is the popular perception! We pay our dues. I once had the embarrassment of a wedding, where the bride's father insisted that I had forgotten the "collection" (the service was not complete) and went around the guests collecting what I had forgotten. He went around all the folk who were lining up for the family photo with a plate, returning in triumph to present the money to me, as an offering?

Is this the sacrifice - No, says Peter - 2:5c.

Worship and thanksgiving is living - not merely Sunday worship, but coming to Jesus and giving our lives to him. Then duty is replaced by joy, life becomes an exciting adventure, where God with us helps us to understand and make sense of life, with all its ups and downs - I wouldn't say this if I did not know that it is true.

Peter is saying something revolutionary.

Sacrifice is life, not giving money to church.

Conclusion:

Religion is popular, while there is a building to confine it in; people who will administer God on our behalf; and while our responsibility is satisfied when we have brought our token gifts.

Peter says: 2:4-5.

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

This is revolutionary stuff, and the call comes loud and clear for us to be Christ's revolutionaries. Let us renew our commitment to be the real church, the revolutionary body of Christ, the scattered people of God at his disposal. To serve, to pray, to share the Good News, and live our faith in the world.

The current COVID-19 crisis with the closure of churches gives us the opportunity for new ways of being Church. We can worship God through making a phone call to an isolated neighbour or dropping off shopping. Those working in our hospitals and care homes are also bringing the love of Christ to others.

The call is to come to Christ and to be the church in our community.