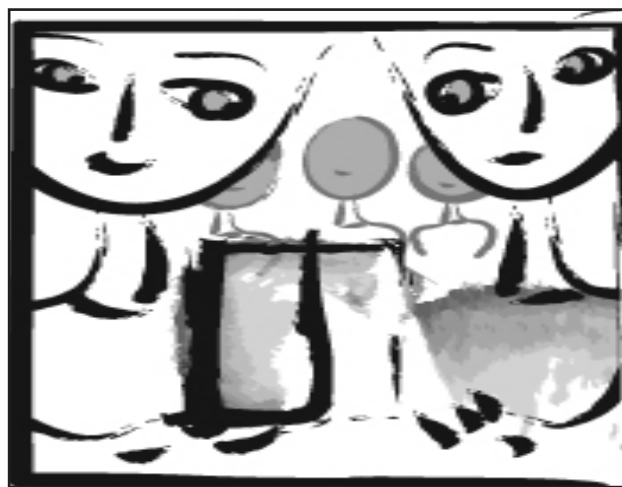


It's not unusual for people to fall out of the habit of going to church. Sometimes we may find ourselves asking 'What's the point?'

How we answer that depends on what it means to be 'the Church'. Some claim that you don't need to go to church to be a Christian, that what matters is living a good and upright life.

The lives of the saints, however, show us that what makes a Christian is not our success in leading wholesome lives, but the humble realization that we can't live without regular doses of God's love made real in the sacraments – especially in Holy Communion, the meal Jesus commanded his Church to share in his presence. In other words, the Church exists not for the self-righteous, but for those who know their need of grace.



Jesus says that he came to call not the righteous but sinners to be his followers (Matthew 9:13), so perhaps the 'un-Christian' behaviour of our fellow churchgoers should not surprise us. People fail. On the other hand, all of us will be able to think of at least a few Christians who radiate goodness and humility. They encourage us and teach us what it means to be holy, and, while they'd be the last to accept this, they show the rest of us how to be saints.

In any generation, the Church never worships by itself, but with the whole company of holy people, living and departed. But our attitude to worship may be the problem. While we can feel uplifted and generous, sometimes worship leaves us feeling dejected and dispirited: 'That didn't do anything for me, Vicar!' We need to remind ourselves that worship is not primarily God's gift to us, but our gift to God. This is why most acts of worship begin by asking for forgiveness. If an act of worship disappoints us, we may well have arrived expecting the wrong things. We become capable of accepting God's overwhelming love when we offer our expectations, our hopes, our disappointments – all that we are to God.

'... worship is not primarily God's gift to us, but our gift to God.'



The wisdom of centuries has taught us that our worship and prayers must be regular. It is unfashionable to say it, but this includes a sense of obligation and self-discipline – in the same way that marriage, for example, commits couples not only to love their partners, but also to tell them so and to be faithful. For most of us, this will mean praying every day and receiving Holy Communion at least once a week. The most important principle, however, is to set a simple and realistic target and to stick with it, however we feel.

We have to live with the fact that the Church on earth will never be perfect. But this sense of our weakness is also our sign of hope, for it reminds us to put our whole trust in God who perfects his strength in our weakness and who sent his Son to us while we were yet sinners.

just as I am

Just as I am, without one plea
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve:
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Just as I am (thy love unknown
has broken every barrier down),
now to be thine, yea, thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come.

Charlotte Elliott (1789–1871)

FURTHER READING

Luke 18: 9-14

Matthew 5: 3-12

Matthew 9: 9-13

Matthew 11: 28-30

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