

church matters

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[0 : 00] Going to church. Church matters. On the 30th of March 1851, there was a really special occasion when a very detailed survey was undertaken of the attendance of people in England and Wales in places of worship.

! It was extremely detailed and the results took a great deal of time to come to light but three years later in 1851, a very long report was presented with many, many tables and one of the bold facts that arose out of that is up on the screen here today that in 1851, out of a total population in England and Wales of 22 million odd, 32.4% of the population was going to church.

There's all sorts of churches, all sorts of belief systems as well but that was the figure that was made. Such census has been made in subsequent years at various times.

Most recently, the Evangelical Alliance did such a survey. In 2005, the population in England only of 50 million there, 3 million are going to church and the percentage of population therefore is 6.3%.

The population has grown more than double the number of people in church has declined as a fifth of the total 150 years ago.

[1 : 35] And they also did further work to try to understand how many of those church situations might be evangelical. Not necessarily evangelical in the name of the church but certainly in its belief and practice.

And that's the figure. In 2005, it's considered that maybe 2.5% of the total population were going to an evangelical church.

It's an interesting statistic, isn't it? Well, the census in 1851 actually did some work in Brighton. And I put this on the screen as well for your interest.

Total population in Brighton was just less than 70,000 150 years ago. 34.7% of people were going to church on that Sunday morning. Many of them went twice or even three times on that day.

2014, I can't tell you more than the fact that the total population is 273,000 plus because in the 2011 census, Brighton and Hove Conurbation had a population of 273,000.

[2 : 47] I've tried to do my sums, trying to assess what I know of the church situation in this city. I think about 12,500 people might be in church today.

Of that, in an evangelical context, 2.2%. A bit under the national average. I don't know how you respond to those sorts of statistics.

Whether that's a surprise to you. I've tried to be rather optimistic, actually, about the church going in this city at the time. But there we are, perhaps 2%.

2% is a very, very small figure. If I was a business, 34% down to 2%. Hmm. It's a big drop, isn't it? Here's another interesting statistic that, don't worry about a lot of the detail here as well, but this shows a trend.

[3 : 53] This is the trend of church attendance, and you could extrapolate that line right back to 1851, and people have extrapolated that line right down to here as well on the right.

So maybe, here we are in 2014, maybe 6% of the population is going to church. The average age of that population going to church is 53 or 54.

It's bigger in the Church of England, which I understand it's 62 in the Church of England.

Someone's rightly said in 20 years' time, half of those people will be dead. So the average age of these, of church people has sort of drifted up from 1980, which was about 38 out of 52 at this time. That tells you one very powerful thing. People of an older age are going to church. The youngsters aren't. Well, does this matter?

Does this matter? Church matters? Does this matter? Well, one response to that might be, I'm not too bothered because the church is actually embarrassing.

[5 : 09] This week, the United Nations called upon the Vatican to exclude people who'd been accused of child abuse. Comes to a fine pass, doesn't it?

When a secular body like the United Nations is calling upon a prominent church group, like the Roman Catholic, and saying that they should be excluding people from their body who've been found guilty of child abuse.

Child abuse, that issue has devastated the church over the last 10, 15 years. And you may say, well, that's only a few situations, and they're probably sort of mostly linked with another sort of church than ours.

Don't be deceived. We're tired with the same brush. Church, church, church. It's all the same, isn't it? So perhaps, maybe it's not a bad thing.

I'm rather embarrassed about the church. It's not good news. Here's something which no doubt Ben hears on the table in London Road. I've heard it again and again, time to time.

[6 : 22] Come along to church. You don't need to go to church to be a Christian. Absolutely true, but. And we'll see later on in this message that there are many people who take this particular line.

But look what's happening in the rest of the world. Now, in fact, there is some vast encouragement in the rest of the world. I've got a few rather remarkable statistics here for you.

In 1900, Korea had no Protestant church. Today, there are over 7,000 churches in the city of Seoul. At the end of the 19th century, the southern portion of Africa was only 3% Christian.

Today, 63% of the population is Christian. You might struggle with some of those ideas.

Membership in the churches in Africa is increasing by 34,000 people a day.

In India, 14 million of the 140 million members of the untouchable caste have become Christians.

More people in the Islamic world have come to Christ in the last 25 years than in the entire history of Christian missions.

[7 : 41] In China, it is estimated that there are now more self-avowed disciples of Jesus and members of the Communist Party. Even the most conservative estimates suggest that China will soon have more Christians than any country.

Across the planet, followers of Jesus are increasing by more than 80,000 a day. And 510 new churches are formed every day.

The irony is, except for the Middle East, where Christianity was born, and Europe and America, to whose civilization it gave birth, Christianity is expanding everywhere else today.

So we should be encouraged by that truth. We should be encouraged by what is happening in the rest of the world.

But that doesn't remove the reality of the decline of the Church of Jesus Christ in this land. If we're talking about the Church, surely we should be listening to the voice of Jesus and what he has to say about the Church.

[8 : 55] What does Jesus Christ think of the Church? We have some powerful words expressed in the book of Ephesians.

Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. That is the measure of the great esteem with which Jesus Christ holds the Church.

So much that he died for her. He feeds and cares for it. What a tender picture that is of the particular care and interest that Jesus Christ, has with the Church.

He is the head over everything for the Church, which is his body. It's a good phrase here to be read in context, but it tells us that Jesus is the head of everything for the sake of the Church.

That all that is happening in this world that is organized and under the authority of Jesus Christ is heading for a glorious conclusion in which the Church is central.

[10 : 12] And I think when we read these words, they remind us of the enormous love, concern, interest, involvement of Jesus Christ in the Church.

The Bible is not embarrassed about the Church. Nor is the Bible much into the individualism of our age.

The pictures in Revelation are constantly of a great gathering, of a community of people, a grand family that has been brought together, brothers and sisters.

This is the Church of Jesus Christ for which he died, and which he looks after, and which he cares for. Brothers and sisters, we've surely known a lot of that ourselves, haven't we?

Brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters, if you're a Christian today, you are the object of these verses.

[11 : 23] You are on the receiving side of this blessing. So when the Church of Jesus Christ in this country is at such a low ebb, it is right for us to ask the questions.

We believe in the sovereignty of our God. We believe there are times and there are seasons. There are times of blessing, and there are also times when blessing seems to be removed.

We believe in the sovereignty of God. We certainly believe that Jesus is in full control of the situation. But yet, when the Church of Jesus Christ is declining and decaying, that inevitably provides some sort of reflection upon the name and the power and the work of Jesus in this land. And I would find it very strange if anybody here today would say, I'm not worried about that. I'm not concerned about that.

We should be concerned. Times of decline in the Church are often associated with times of judgment. Because it's certainly true that Jesus Christ is not always happy with the way that His people behave.

[12:55] You read letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation, and you see again and again that Jesus says, well done for this, but I have this against you.

Be careful because I might remove the candlestick from you. I won't keep on tolerating misbehavior. I won't put up with sinfulness. This is the way that Jesus Christ deals honestly, openly, clearly, maturely with His own people.

It isn't always just a stream of love and comfort and encouragement, but also serious things.

So it's right for us to ask the question, if Jesus Christ is looking upon the Church in Brighton today, what is He to say to us? Is He pleased with us?

[13:55] Or does He have something against us? Judgment on the Church is also judgment on the land. It is no blessing at all for Brighton and Hove that the Church declines.

No blessing at all when the lights go out. No blessing at all when there are less Christians populating the city. Where God's grace seems to be removed more and more.

We read in Romans 1 about one of the methods of God's judgment, how God gives people over. God gives people up. And He withdraws His presence.

He withdraws His restraint. How many things have happened in the last 10 years in this city which you would never have believed would have happened? But they have. They've had.

They've had. And maybe there hasn't been a voice rising up in contradiction to it. Maybe it's a time of judgment upon the Church.

[15:06] Maybe it's a time of judgment on the city. So what's to be done? What should be done? And here's an answer.

Nothing. Nothing. Just carry on being faithful. Inverted commas. Just carry on being faithful. Now that's the line that has been taken countless situations.

And there's a great truth in that. Because only God can grow His church. Only God saves people.

Do you realize the complete weakness that we're in? We cannot save a single person. Cannot make anybody a Christian. We have great problems with this idea that in some sort of psychological or sociological way people will become Christians.

It's a miracle. And it's God's work. And so people might say just carry on being faithful. We have to battle through the hard time. Well we pray for revival.

[16:21] And you'll know because I preached on it about six months ago that revival is a core issue in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. And I believe we should pray for revival.

And we should pray for a mighty outpouring of God's Spirit in an incontrovertible way. A demonstration of His power. The most unlikely of people becoming Christians.

That's what happens in revival. Brighton has never seen it. We've seen plenty of campaigns. And so we haven't seen revival. And I encourage you to read your church history and to find out about these times when God blesses in extraordinary measure.

He does that. And He does it in times of particular decline and declension. And we could say today quite truthfully God please come in revival.

You can see how weak and needy we are. Come and revive your work. Show your mighty power. Show the saving power of Jesus Christ in a way this city's never seen before.

[17:27] Or we could adapt to the world. I caught analysis on Radio 4 9.30 last Sunday evening.

It's probably still on iPlayer if you get a chance to listen to it. Did anybody hear that at all? Okay.

Okay. Most interesting. Declining in the Church of England.

What is to be done? And the subtitle of the program was Is the Church of England writing its own suicide note? And one of the key points that was being made is that there is such a difference between what the church says and what the people actually believe let alone what people outside

the church believe.

what they call the values gap. What do people think about sexual ethics?

Well the contention was that the church says one thing the people sitting in the churches believe another and the world is about 20 miles ahead. The point was made that in the last three years the thinking about the issue of same-sex marriage which wasn't even on the agenda has now become so mainstream that the church is completely out of touch.

[18 : 58] What's the answer? Ah, the church needs to catch up. The church needs to catch up. We just need to realize the world's gone on. We need to rethink all these things that we've once held so dear.

There's a values gap and people won't come into church if they see that values gap. Well there are three possible answers to this problem.

I want to suggest and what we're going to be doing this morning is we're going to make sure of our foundations. And we're going to be clear what we are believing and doing what God wants.

Praise God for his Bible. Praise God for his word. He's given us his truth. And I think it's very helpful for us to actually look in the book of Acts, Acts chapter 2 as was read to us.

This great story which we're very familiar with if we're Christians. This day of Pentecost 50 days after the Passover. Only a few days after Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

[20 : 11] We're going to look in the book of Acts chapter 2. We're going to see what God says which is of abiding significance because there are principles that are given in this passage that we've read which have continual significance for the church of Jesus Christ.

It's easy for people to put Acts 2 in a kind of box that's marked miraculous, amazing, charismatic, day of Pentecost, special, and then say everything else after that a bit different.

But actually when you look in detail at these words you see that what is said and written here by Luke about that first day and what is given to us about that first day is exactly the same sort of thing which the apostles were spreading throughout the world in the subsequent years.

Exactly the same sort of thoughts about the message, about the gathering of people, about the behaviour of people, all these things are expressed in this opening passage in Acts chapter 2.

And it gives us encouragement. It gives us encouragement. Verse 47 says to us and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

[21 : 40] this is not a guarantee but it's a massive encouragement. This is not a guarantee but it's a massive encouragement. And we shouldn't hide behind the idea of the sovereignty of God to stop us being encouraged by the thought that when God's people do the things that God wants that there is a good hope in our hearts that He will add, that He will increase, that He will bless.

I want to start with the first word and you'll find it on your sheet, the sheet of notes there and I've given you those notes there because not just so that you can sort of jot down some extra things as they happen but please if there's some way in which God speaks to you this morning it's really important that you seal that, that you write it down, that you record it, you don't allow it to be snatched away.

We read in verses 37 to 41 when the people heard this they were cut to the heart this was when they heard the message about Jesus and it's very interesting how Peter when he was preaching this message was very bold very straightforward and he drew a very distinct contrast between what they had been believing and what he was now commanding them to believe.

where they put all their thought and their desires and their energy in the past where was their religion it was founded upon the likes of Abraham and David and he's saying you're looking in the wrong direction now don't look to David you look to Jesus it's Jesus who died it's Jesus who rose again it's Jesus who was at the right hand of God the Father his message is about Jesus Christ when the people heard this they were cut to the heart it's a rather quaint expression it means that they were deeply troubled in their spirits they were challenged by what they'd heard they had an experience which I hope we all have from time to time where they heard the word of God and when they heard that word they were put into a state of some confusion in their spirit they were made to feel guilty they recognised that they were responsible for the death of

Jesus they saw that they were sinners that made them very upset in their spirit and they said to Peter and the other apostles what shall we do what shall we do and Peter replied repent be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit the promises for you and your children and for all who are far off for all whom the Lord our God will call many other words he warned!

[24 : 56] themselves from this corrupt generation you see there was more in this message there was more content to it with many other words he warned them and he pleaded with them he kept their attention he wouldn't let them go you can see they were upset but he didn't want to stop at that point those who accepted his message were baptised in about 3,000 were added to their number that day what a day it's great just to think about it isn't it where was the water 3,000 people that day there was a baptism these people repented there was a life change that took place on that day in these people's lives as I put up their decision change difference this whole passage is just reeks of that doesn't it life was not the same again they were one thing and they became another they thought they were okay but they realised they had to repent repent it sounds like a very negative

Victorian word but let me tell you it's an extremely positive thing to do repent! repent says I'm going one way in my life I'm going to turn 180 degrees and go in the opposite direction I realise I've been wrong I want to do what's right I'm looking one way I'm now looking at another I've set my face to go in another direction so powerful and so strong was this that they wanted the world to know it and they committed themselves not just to be linking hands with those apostles those despised fishermen but also being prepared to go through the initiation ceremony of baptism to declare Jesus as their Lord and Saviour they were not closing the values gap they were not following the advice of Radio 4 last Sunday night how are we going to save the church they were not saying to these upstarts ah well

Jesus he's just another prophet add him to the pantheon of all the ones we've already known about just a little tinkering at the edges there don't rock the boat they weren't doing that at all they were accepting God's values they were saying I've been wrong God you've been right!

and because of that I accept your values and not mine oh yeah but God's values may be different to everyone else's values surely that's what we read from the Bible isn't it?

we live in a world where the values and the way people are the way people live are in very many cases in complete contradiction to the things that God counts to be good and right that's the fact so God doesn't say to us today just cuddle up and get close to the way other people think but he says get yourself under my authority hear my words take my words into your life take all of them and you know that's what becoming a Christian is about I don't want to challenge you today if you've somehow got another impression that somehow it was to do with something different well you just read this passage and you see that these people had to change they had to turn around in their thinking and their relationships and their behaviour they had to change there was no middle road it was as powerful and as vital as that and I say baptism and I say remember baptism and I challenge anyone today if you say you're a Christian but you have not been baptised as a believer

[29 : 45] I challenge you to do exactly what those people did 2,000 years ago those 3,000 people if you're a Christian you should be publicly acknowledging before others that you belong to Jesus Christ and that he is your Lord and he is the one you're going to follow by God's grace for the rest of your days so if this is something you've just put off I encourage you to not put it off interesting they didn't wait until on the very same day they said I want to be baptised put it down on your sheet perhaps something that you really must address I want you to notice also how they belonged to one another how they joined together those who accepted the message were baptised about 3,000 were added to their number that day there was a number at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day there were 3,000 more and it was identifiable that these people were Christians they joined with one another verse 44 all the believers were together and had everything in common they joined together now this is about a way of thinking and we're going to find this very hard but it is a way of thinking which is biblical and right it's a way of thinking that doesn't constantly start with I but starts with us what is this fellow doing here

I tap in the word selfie you know what selfie means it's a new word in the English language now isn't it you know what selfie is you get your mobile phone out put it in your face you take a picture and you tell the world how wonderful you look this man here in some foreign country is being chased by a ball and he is holding his mobile phone to take a picture of himself that must be the ultimate in narcissistic behaviour that you are just about to be mown down by a ball but you've got to take a selfie but of course we're not like that at all are we not just like that ten years today no last week it's the birthday of Facebook how many people are on Facebook that's interesting some are sort of half on Facebook if you're like us we're sort of there but not really there at all

I'm sure it's good for some things but I'm really convinced that Jesus Christ did not set up his church to be a Facebook community Facebook could do many wonderful things but Jesus Christ came to

set up face to face what we're doing today we're meeting together so I even have a problem with www.loadsofquestionmarks where you will find much better preaching than you're hearing this morning and you'll be in much more comfortable surroundings because you can stay in your bed you might even be able to find another community of people all in front of their screens today and you don't have to leave the comfort of home and have a nice warm cup of coffee next to you and so on and you can say well I've been to church today

I heard a great message and I communicated with a few other people www I believe that's a deception there is something extraordinarily precious and lovely about the people of God meeting together in the flesh as we're doing today and I know some of you have had difficult journeys getting here and it's a struggle and it's a pain and you've got to get the children ready and all the rest of it and you can sometimes think why bother why bother because this is what Jesus Christ died for he died for a people to become a community died for people to be together it's a way of thinking it's not me but us is us here's another chart 2007 up here regular church goes probably a bit big that little bit of the pie okay so this is the total population all of that that little bit of the pie is regular church goes as I say it's probably a bit big non-church that's people who've never been to church never been to church at all it's growing isn't it what do we hear this week about bible illiteracy how many children have not a clue

Noah Noah is he a bible character yeah where's nativity nativity is that in the bible where is your treasure i think the church of jesus christ is a priority it's a priority it has a very very high place and that means that there are choices that we need to be making in our lives i don't think it was ever easy for people to get together i'm not sure they carried on meeting every day as they did here in acts 2 what i do know is that the early church was full of people who were slaves they didn't get much time off in the 19th century if you were in service and working in one of the local big rig houses around here you might get two or three hours off on a sunday it wasn't easy to know what to do with that time it was intended that it would be available so you could go to church i wonder if they made those choices we are cursed with choice aren't we we are cursed with choice 30 years ago there wouldn't be premiership football on a sunday the shops wouldn't be teaming open there wouldn't be the plethora of children's events and all sorts of things going on and sponsored this and sponsored that half marathons full marathons jumping into the lake getting fit marathons you know all that stuff is going on sundays sunday is the church's day it's the lord's day and i plead with us all i give a sort of rallying cry to say let's make this whole day special in the lord's sight there will be exceptions there will be situations where people have to work on a sunday some sort of business let me tell you i'm in an industry which works on sundays but i have proved the lord in this i've really wanted to keep sunday special and god has made it possible for me to maintain my job and at the same time to be able to pretty much always be here 24 hours because it's important because it's a priority and it's a priority in the eyes of jesus christ and therefore he will give grace and he will give a way round he'll give a way for this to happen too much choice too much choice and it grieves my heart when christians get into the habit of doing what everyone else is doing on sundays it's too easy to do it bright and maybe plague an annex one sunday i don't know the shops are open why not shop on sunday is it wrong i'm not going to condemn anybody and i'm just saying it's not the best use of your time if this is a special day that god's given to us to enjoy to be together to do all the things that are precious in his sight like acts two then every time you're missing the church is diminished on your pieces of paper just think about your choices think about those choices you say that is so narrow and limiting there's a big wide world out there and there's so much experience i want to have and you're just kind of stuffing it into a small narrow bowl a sort of a narrow container but i can't read the new testament in the other way the gathering of god's people like this is precious in the eyes of jesus christ young people younger people you know people in your 30s 20s

[39 : 41] you're setting out your stall for life you're making your decisions and what you do by the way of choices now is going to become your habit it will be your habit and it will be very very hard to break if you are not in the habit of meeting with god's people you'll find it very hard to do so in 10 or 15 years time we all make the kind of statement when it's less busy when i've finished my exams when i've done this when i've finished doing the house and so forth then then then then believe me it will never happen time the time for joining is now the time for the right choices is now the time for the right habits is now becoming belonging and behaving this promise is of great abiding and helpful significance for all of us seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well whatever you lack or you think you lack whatever pain and trouble and difficulty you think making right choices might mean seek first his kingdom and all these things will

be given to you as well we close with a great song number 568