

When You Believe in God but Not in His Church

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[0 : 00] My name's Andy and those of you who I haven't met before, hello. I am together with Jay and Lydia, one of three trainee vicars who are placed with a Christchurch here for this year.

I'm the one that you won't have met before, so hello. We arrived, Lucy and Gideon and I, in Bristol in August of last year. It was a bit of a rush getting here.

We'd found out quite late that we'd been accepted to come and train at Trinity and we had to organise lots of things. We had to let out our flat. We had to find a place to live here.

We needed to, you know, arrange for moving and so on. And so by the time we got here, it felt like a rush getting into the course. And then, you know, a new course like that, it's a new way of life, a new routine to learn, new knowledge to pick up, new friends to meet.

And so it was busy. And then we got sick. All three of us managed to get sick in the first half term. And then the deadlines mounted up.

[1 : 07] And with one thing and another, we went through the entire year and I didn't feel like I had a chance to take a breath. And it was June. It was June by the time I felt like I had a little bit of time and a little bit of space to consider the really huge step that I'd made in my life by agreeing to train to be a vicar.

And do you know what flooded into my life, flooded into my heart and my mind on that day when I stopped in a church and thought? It was fear.

It was absolute blind terror. Because, you know, I had a good life. I had a good job.

We had a nice flat in a nice, exciting part of London. We went to a great church. We were members of a great church. Who wants more than to be a member of a great church?

But there I was considering giving up all of that for something really uncertain. You know, becoming a vicar. Becoming a vicar means, Clive will tell you, poor salary.

[2 : 15] Fewer choices than you get as an independent person following your own career. And also the Church of England is great at times, but sometimes can be a bit funny.

And also being a vicar, Clive really does his best to... But it's not cool being a vicar, really. And I realized that I'm somebody for whom it's far, far, far too important to look cool, to look good, to be impressive.

So there were lots of genuine reasons why I might be afraid, but I came to realize that most of those were not to do with the C of E. They were to do with me. They were inside of me. So when Clive offered me the chance to preach, and there was the chance to preach on this passage, on this topic, when you love God but you don't love his church, then I was like, that's for me.

That's a topic I can speak on. So the book that we've been working through in the series, *The Christian Atheist* by Craig Rochelle, this chapter is all about people that he comes across in his life who are really committed Christians, love God, but for whatever reason haven't found a commitment to the church, haven't found a way into the church family.

And he talks about all the reasons that they give for that, but he also talks about just how important it is to overcome those barriers and to become part of the church, and that's what we're going to talk about today. Craig Rochelle mentions a number of reasons why people don't commit to church, and I can relate to a lot of them.

[3 : 51] How about you? He talks about people who've been hurt in the past, who've had a bad experience, and that that puts them off committing. People who don't feel that they've got anything to offer, who don't feel confident, who feel like they'd rather play it safe and not commit and not be part of it.

And people who just don't feel they can find the right church, the right one that suits them. I can relate to every single one of those reasons, and those reasons hold me back from something that

could be a real blessing in my life.

The passage we're going to look at today is one of the few times that Jesus mentions the church directly. Jesus had been ministering for a few years by this point.

He'd received some praise and some acclaim, but he'd also experienced some opposition. And he just heard at this point some really bad news.

His cousin, John the Baptist, had lost his life because of his following the call on his life. So Jesus, knowing what was ahead for him and needing to process this news, he took the disciples off to a solitary place, a place where they could be away from the crowds, where they could talk and have some time.

[5 : 11] It was quite an amazing time for the disciples. They saw Jesus feed 5,000 people. They saw Jesus walk on water. They saw Jesus transfigured before their eyes into, you know, white clothes and shiningness.

And Jesus also talked to them about some tough stuff. He told them that he was going to go on to Jerusalem and he was going to lose his life there. And he wanted really to make sure that they knew who he was as well.

So he talked to them about who he was. So in the passage we've just heard, Jesus says, So who do people say that I am? Who do people say the Son of Man is?

By which he meant this person in front of you, me. And they said, Oh yes, some say Elijah, some say the prophets, some say John the Baptist. But then he turns the focus on them and he says to them, What about you?

What about you? Who do you say I am? And then at that moment, it's Peter's big moment. Peter stands up and he says, Oh, I think I've got the right answer.

[6 : 13] It's like that Sunday school moment or that school moment, isn't it? I think I've got the right answer. It's inside me. It's coming up. I can feel it. I think it's the right answer. I'm going to say it. I'm going to say it. I'm going to say it. You're the Messiah.

You're the Son of God. I can really relate to Peter in that moment. That kind of, he'd seen Jesus ministering. He'd seen a lot of stuff. And he felt like it was adding up for him.

He knew what it was all about. There was something in Jesus that was different, that was important, that was special, something of God. And in that moment, when Jesus asked that question, he thought, I'm going to say it. I don't care if I look foolish.

I'm going to say it. And that was a moment that changed everything for Peter. Jesus says to him, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, because this has not been revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

He says that Peter, Simon Peter, is blessed because he's heard from God. And that's a blessing. And because he's had the courage to follow up on what he's heard and follow it with his life.

[7 : 18] And because he's right, because he's got the right answer. He's onto the source of life. And Jesus goes on to say, and I tell you that you are Peter.

So often, this disciple's called Simon Peter because Jesus is giving him a new name. Jesus says, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church.

This was a humble guy, a bumbling guy. He came from, he was a fisherman. And he came from a backward part of Israel. And he was a guy who got stuff wrong all the time.

He was keen, but he got the wrong end of the stick. He failed. He did silly things. And he was going to continue to be all of those things. But actually, in this moment, Jesus is saying, I see beyond that. I see something else beyond that. I see strength in you. I see faithfulness in you. I see something in you that a church can be built on. And it's really significant that he gives Peter this new name, Peter, because of course, Peter is a play on words of rock.

[8 : 21] So I'm going to build on this rock, my church. But just the mere idea of changing a name is significant in the Bible. Names in the Bible are never coincidental.

They're never random. They've always got a deep meaning. And there were two other famous people in the history of God's people whose name was changed. Abraham. His name was changed from Abraham to Abraham.

Jacob's name was changed to Israel. And in both cases, God wanted to say something through that change. He wanted to say something about their character, but also something about the role that they were going to play.

In all of those, in those two people, God was going to build a new people of God. They were going to be the foundation stones for a new people, a new family, a new people group.

And it was the same for Peter. Abraham and Jacob had incredible encounters with God. But not everybody was going to have that kind of encounter.

[9 : 28] So God created through them a people who could show the world what God was like. And that's what he's doing with Peter as well. Peter was able to walk face to face with Jesus in the years that Jesus was on this planet ministering.

How few people get that opportunity. And so God creates through Peter a people group that can show God to the world. It takes a people to change the world.

God knows what he's doing. That's always been his way of doing it. And it's his way of doing it now. The church that was described in Acts, in Acts 2 and in Acts 4 the church that just erupted in Jerusalem.

It turned Jerusalem upside down. And some of that was through amazing preaching because Peter became this amazing preacher and the others did too. But as much as that it was about the lives that they lived and people witnessing their lives and going wow there's something different there. There's something important there. There's something life changing there. There's something of God in these people and I want to know more. It's great to be welcoming Joy and Edie into the church family today.

[10 : 49] And it's exciting to think about Donna and Dave and those two guys. You know what is their family going to become? And who you know what will people that witness their family see in them?

Will they see God? I'm sure that they will and it's exciting. I was I stare share a study at my college with a guy called Ben who's amazing.

I'm totally in awe of Ben. He and his wife Sarah have got six kids under the age of ten. Six kids. And I had lunch with the on a Friday they often bring their six kids in and I had lunch with them all of them on one big table.

It was amazing. They're lovely kids. And I was just talking to Sarah and she was saying God uses their family so much to do his work. They just invite people to come and be part of their family and those people see something in that family that they've not experienced elsewhere.

Earlier this year an eleven year old girl who was their neighbour gave her life to Jesus. She doesn't have a church family. She's got no background in church but she was just around their house all the time and she saw in them something amazing and she gave her life to Jesus.

[12 : 06] I'm sure you could tell stories like that of your family or your friends of your church. I could tell you a story. In my church in King's Cross every year we do a social outreach project in a deprived estate near us and we do improvement works in the estate we do social activities and sometimes we decorate people's houses and there was one guy a couple of years ago who had just so profound needs such multiple needs his name was Joseph and when we went round to his house they'd ask could we help to decorate his house and it was phenomenal to see the state that he was living in I couldn't believe it it was dirty it was untidy it was dilapidated and so we went in there and we decorated and we did a great job we cleaned it and cleaned it and we redecorated and it looked great at the end but much more profound than the decoration of his flat was the experience that Joseph had in those days as I say he's an elderly guy with really profound needs and he was very lonely it says in the bible that

God puts the lonely in families and for those days we had to get him out of his flat because we were decorating it and so we just surrounded him with people who looked after him and loved him and it affected him profoundly we stayed in touch with him sadly a few months later he died but do you know what I know that those days and the months afterwards were an experience of heaven for him because he had been he'd experienced love he'd experienced God in meeting us I know you can tell stories just like that that's why the church exists because it takes a people it takes a family it takes a group to change the world it takes a group to show God and that's the invitation that is ours this morning God is God has always worked through a group of people he needs a group of people to show the world himself and his invitation to you and his invitation to me is do you want to be part of that do you want to be part of something like that and

I don't know about you but my answer is yes but then my courage fails it took courage for Peter to respond in that moment that we've been talking about I know who Jesus is I know it's inside of me I can see it but it would have been terrifying to have said that thing that he had to say in front of

everybody and it would have been terrifying for him to have followed the call that was on his life from that day on he followed Jesus to Jerusalem watched him executed his friends and families scattered he went on to speak in front of thousands of people in Jerusalem he spoke in front of authorities that were trying to put him behind bars they succeeded in putting him behind bars he eventually died in Rome because of his faith he's martyred in Rome they say that he was crucified upside down right because he didn't want to be crucified the way that Jesus had been so huge huge consequences from follow that call but I don't think he would have chosen anything different you know he's he was part of founding a movement that literally billions and billions and billions of people have signed up to since then I don't think he'd choose anything different as for me I feel God is calling me to consider this thing about vicaring it's just a from it's that's the particular type of calling that he seems to be talking to me about and my courage fails I'm terrified but I'm determined to follow the call somehow anyway Lucy and I my wife we're talking about this fear what is this fear that you've got in you Andy where does it come from why is that holding you back how can we change that and I'm hopeful that we'll manage but I wanted to ask you what about you what's the step that you feel God is asking of you what's the commitment to his church or to him in your life that he's asking of you today you me yeah