

The Importance Of Going To Church 1

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[0 : 00] A lesson this morning was taken from the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, beginning at the 22nd verse. I would be grateful if you would turn to those verses in your pew Bibles.

John chapter 6, verse 22. First, I'd like to deal with any anxieties you may have.

The choir is singing at 11.15, and so you're the choir today in case you didn't recognize it, and by and large, you've done fairly well. You missed one or two cues, but otherwise you've done well. And Pat and Sue Matthews are away in Whistler with the confirmation class, and so I'm left here alone, and since it's very lonely up there, I thought I'd come down here to be a little closer to company.

The story begins with a mystery, and I'd like to point out to you the mystery with which it begins. Verse 22 says, On the next day, the people who remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone.

[1 : 31] So if you want, it's the mystery of only one boat. Now, what I want to talk to you about as you try and work out the problem with that mystery, I want to talk to you about going to church and why it's important to go to church.

And of course, that's not really significant for you because you're here. So I can't persuade you to go because you're already here. But there is some possibility that even though you appear to be here, you're not in fact here.

And you can consider the possibilities of how that might come to be. That I'm here because I want to set an example for my children.

That might mean that you're not here yourself, you're only here in a sense. And you may be here because your wife has made you come, or because your father or mother has made you come. And for a number of reasons, we might go through the congregation one by one and find that there's very few people here indeed.

And so it's to the rest of you that I want to talk to people who may be here but aren't really. And I myself am without excuse because I'm only here because it's my job and I'm paid to be here.

[2 : 47] But I have learned to be very grateful for that since it means that I get up and go to church almost every Sunday.

And that's been a great blessing over the years, I want you to know. Well, back to the mystery. The mystery is that there was only one vote. Now, these people were a great host of people, at least 5,000 in number.

And they had been fed a fairly ample supper. Ample because there was a lot left over when they were finished. It was a simple supper of barley bread, which was the bread the poor people ate, and fish.

It might correspond to fish and chips at Granville Market in terms of our modern way of looking at life. But it was a very simple kind of peasant meal. And they all partook of it, and they all enjoyed it very much.

And they knew that Jesus had been the one through whom this meal had been presented to them. And so as the darkness fell on them, and they all found places to sleep on the shores of the Sea of Galilee that night, they saw that there was one vote.

[4 : 00] And they were all very secure because they saw the disciples get into the vote and leave, but Jesus hadn't left. So they knew that there wasn't another vote, so he must still be there.

So when they woke up in the morning, they undoubtedly were expecting a breakfast to compare with the supper they'd had the night before. And they looked around in their company to try and find

where the provider of that supper was, and they found that he was gone.

And great consternation moved in among them because they didn't see him go. Only as you go back and read through the story will you find that a great wind came up in the night, and Christ came to his disciples walking on the water.

Now, that wasn't seen by all of them, so they weren't in on what had happened. It was a mystery to them. So when a number of votes came and landed at that spot, they all climbed on, or as many of them as could, and they went in hot pursuit of the man who had provided a free lunch in a world which even then knew that there was no such thing as a free lunch in normal circumstances.

Well, when they found him, and they found him on the other side, they went after him. And you can see what happened in verse 25 when it says, Rabbi, when did you come here?

[5 : 28] They're still trying to solve the mystery. But Jesus put them more directly in the perspective by saying, you seek me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

In other words, you're looking for more. Now, what Jesus does at that point is to put his finger on what life is all about.

And anybody who has any common sense at all will recognize that what life is all about is getting bread. And the absolute priority for all of us, and I look at the businessman mostly, but probably working wives and all sorts of things, the priority in our lives is putting bread on the table.

So that claims absolute priority over any other activity we might get involved in. Do you begin to see how this relates to going to church?

Don't? Well, I'm coming to it, so be patient and keep looking at it. What happened then in the discussion is, Jesus said to them, if you're going to work this hard, why don't you work for something which is of ultimate value?

[6 : 56] You spend all your time and all your energy and all your resources to put bread on the table. But why don't you, rather than that, try and do the work of God?

Well, they seemed to think that that was a good idea. And so they said, well, what is the work of God? And Jesus said to them, something which practical, hard-minded people might find difficult to assimilate.

He said to them, the work of God is to believe on him whom he hath sent. Then he went on and made to them the startling revelation when he said to them, I am the bread of life.

And with me, it's not a matter of eating for much of it. It's a matter of believing. You see, the really important thing about the work of God, the real priority for human beings, is to believe.

To believe in the one that God has sent. Well, this didn't get him very far. Because they then went back on him. And they decided, well, this wasn't what they had come for.

[8 : 11] And they said, show us a sign so that we can be sure that you're the one that was sent from God. Well, they'd all been present the night before for the feeding of the 5,000.

And yet, for their own purposes, they were prepared to ask for another sign the next morning. So that there comes a point at which no more signs are available. If you haven't read the signs up till now, there aren't any more signs available to you.

It's time that you came to the point of believing. But they had difficulty with that. And Jesus told them that the supreme work that they had to do was to come to put their faith in him.

Seek me, he said, not because you saw signs, because you didn't see them, but because you ate your fill of the bread. Well, what they always do to John, to Jesus in the Gospel of John, is to go back to Moses.

They said, we're absolutely true to Moses. And if you would only be like Moses, then we would believe in you the same way we believe in him. Read Exodus 33.

[9 : 23] If you want to see how much they believed in Moses and the kind of problems he had with them. But that's just by the way. They look back, and as we all look back in our lives, we talk with glowing pride of the way they had followed Moses.

So now they were in the position of having to look back to Moses. And they said, well, Moses fed us. Why don't you? And of course, Jesus said, Moses did.

My father fed you. And now he wants to give you not that bread which will sustain you in the journey through the wilderness till you come to the promised land.

But he wants to feed you with the bread that will sustain you through the whole of life so that you will never hunger and never thirst and so that you will share in eternal life something entirely different.

Now, that's then really the answer to the question of why you go to church, why you should go to church. in order to do the work of God. And the work of God is to believe on him whom he hath sent.

[10:38] And this is a very important work because, you see, when Karl Marx comes along and says, I have a new way of distributing bread to the people, everybody gets excited and says, well, either that's a terrible thing or that's a wonderful thing, depending on which side of the revolution you're on.

whether, ah, where you are. But all sorts of people tend to say that the economic problem is the ultimate problem in life.

And he who solves the economic problem is the man we need to follow. And for them, they understood the economic problem very simply in terms of bread on the table.

And they were prepared to follow the man who could provide. And it seems to me that the way that the world has been put together, that the really important thing is that men should have eternal life. They don't examine their lives only in terms of the short span of three, four years and ten. But they see life as something which is eternal.

[11:50] something which is part of another kingdom. In the Gospel of John, it talks all the time about eternal life. The same idea is expressed in the other three Gospels as the kingdom of God.

So when you're reading John's Gospel, you can read the kingdom of God for eternal life. And when you're reading the other Gospels, you can read eternal life for the kingdom of God, just to expand your understanding.

And the purpose of God for people was to bring them to his kingdom, to bring them to eternal life. And that the whole understanding of this veil of misery and tears, as we so often describe this earthly life, this time of pain and suffering, this body of humiliation, the shortcomings and limitations of our human existence, the frailty and weakness that we are subject to, is that it is, in a sense, a kind of shadowed print against the future of the purpose of God which transcends it all and which is called eternal life.

So that when you come to church, you come, in a sense, to be involved in the work of faith. And when you stand up and sing, you are exercising yourself in the work of faith and of believing, because believing is the verb for the noun faith.

And so when you kneel to pray, you are exercising the work of God which is the work of faith, of believing in him and he has faith.

[13:40] That's what God wants, for you to come to believe in Jesus Christ. Now I agree that it seems very impractical.

And nothing else has worked. So why don't you consider it as a possibility that maybe the key to the understanding of the complexity of being a human being is in fact that it is a matter of faith.

It is a matter of believing. I agree entirely with you that it would be wrong to believe in something which was not for all that you were able to know and understand, which was not the truth.

But then, I commend to you the person of Jesus Christ as being the truth. The truth about man and the truth about creation and the truth about your life.

So that he says to people, will you come to believe in me? Will you do the work of God which is in fact to believe in me? You see, the trouble is that if you're successful at getting bread on the table, you soon find more bread on your table than you can eat.

[14:58] And so what is it? And most of us suffer probably in this particular part of the world from having more bread on the table than we can handle.

And even having that unlimited supply of it doesn't meet the deepest longings of our hearts and lives. It doesn't satisfy us so that we're no longer hungry.

We're no longer thirsty. The testimony of all sorts of people is that having all the bread on the table they need, there still isn't what they essentially want.

Well, that was the business of bread. When these people found out that Jesus wanted them to believe on him, they turned away because their view of the purpose of life was far more practical. they really didn't see any solution in that direction. It's interesting, isn't it, that part of the world suffers from not enough bread and the other part of the world suffers from too much bread.

[16:10] And that the message to the whole world of the Christian gospel is to believe. And somehow that faith brings us into relationship. Can I show you that in this sixth chapter of John, the whole ministry of Jesus comes to its pinnacle.

Five thousand people following him on a long day's journey around the north end of the Sea of Galilee and finding themselves without food and there Jesus in front of their eyes gives thanks and breaks bread and feeds them all.

The numbers are recorded here. But by the end of the same chapter in which the five thousand are recorded, there's some sobering words. Look at verse 66.

After this, many of his disciples grew back and no longer went with him. That was the end of his popular ministry.

They had gone along with him now because they'd seen the miracles, they'd seen the signs, they'd eaten the bread, they'd come to the place where everything they wanted, they'd got. And now the cost was beginning to fell.

[17:25] And it says that many of them turned back and no longer went with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, will you also go away? And to me, that's one of the most poignant moments in the whole of the New Testament.

when Jesus, seeing his popular ministry coming to an end and seeing in the faces and the disappointed looks in his disciples' faces the possibility that they felt they had taken a wrong course, they were turning away to follow him no longer.

Jesus said to his personal disciples, will you also go away? And you see, the church is very much like that if it is, in fact, the church of Jesus Christ.

It has moments of great popularity. It has moments when people think that it will provide all the answers. Sometimes it tries to pretend that it can.

But there comes a time when the essential reality of the work of God, which is to believe in Jesus Christ, comes home to a man.

[18:39] He finds that what he had expected from the church is not what he's going to get. What he had anticipated and hoped for, the kind of rewards that he had hoped for, aren't going to come from there.

The kind of easy answers that he thought might come through that route that hadn't come through other routes might be there in the church. Then he suddenly discovers that there is this penetrating question.

That it's not going to put bread on the table in a normal way. But the essential work of the church is to believe on Jesus Christ. To be a personal, committed, believing disciple of Jesus Christ.

That's what it's all about. And you can't escape. You can't read the New Testament and come to any other conclusion than that. The question comes, will you believe?

Or will you also go away? And good old Peter, who we can all identify with because he made so many wonderful mistakes and made them with all his heart.

[19:51] Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. And we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.

You see, right at the heart of our life as Christians, and of our life in the church, is this reality. We have believed, and in believing, we have come to know.

Lots of people hold back, and they say, when we know, we will come to believe. But the reading of the New Testament works in an entirely different way.

The work of the Holy Spirit works in exactly the opposite way. It encourages you to believe, and as you believe, you come to know who Christ is.

So the only possible justifiable reason for anybody to be found at church is because they have undertaken the responsibility of believing in Jesus Christ.

[21:15] Otherwise, it can't make very much sense to you. You can't lead anywhere. it only will bring you ultimately to the place it brought these people who woke up that morning and saw that there had only been one boat and Jesus was gone, and they went hot footed in pursuit of him, in great excitement, only to find that what they expected of him was not available, that what he asked of them was that they might believe in him, that they might go on believing him, and that no matter what happened, they would go on believing him.

And as they believed, they would come to know, as the disciples came to know, that Jesus is indeed the Holy One of God. It was on that that their life was to be found.

It was that that they were called to. That was the work of God. And there is no more demanding task in the whole of the world than to believe on the one whom he has sent.

And that is the task we're called to. That's what it all means. And that's the challenge that we all face when Christ turns to us, perhaps with a lifetime of church going behind us, which has ended in frustration and disappointment for us because what we'd expected wasn't there.

And Christ says to us, will you also go away? As most people do, ultimately. And we will the answer which Peter makes, I pray, may be our answer.

[23 : 19] I pray it may be my answer and your answer. Lord, to whom shall we go?

You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God. going to sing now hymn number 94.

I'm going to sing now hymn number 94. who are nothing.

I know. I know I know I know I know I know you The End The End

The End The End The End

[26 : 51] The End The End Let us pray.

Amen. O God of unchangeable power and eternal life, look favorably upon thy whole church, that wonderful and sacred mystery, and by the tranquil operation of thy perpetual providence, carry out the work of men's salvation.

The things which were cast down, may be raised up, and may be raised up, and may be returning into unity, through him by whom all things were made, even thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.