

WHY JOIN?

So these three ministers met up for a coffee one day and as they talked they discovered they shared the same unusual problem.

Each of their church buildings were infested by large numbers of bats.

And the bats weren't about to go away.

It seemed impossible to shift them.

The first minister said, *"I managed to capture them all in cages by putting bat food in there and I padlocked the cages and loaded them into a estate car.*

Then I drove 200 miles into the countryside, before setting them free, but when I got back to the church the bats had already flown back and were waiting for me."

The second minister said, *"I got the loan of a shotgun and I decided to pick them off one by one. But the bats kept dodging the bullets and I made a lot of holes in the roof of the church. Now the bats are still there and my treasurer is mad at me for the damage I've caused."*

The third minister said, *"Well I got rid of mine alright. We don't have any problem with bats anymore."*

The other ministers were impressed. *"How on earth did you do it?"*

"Well what I did was this. I baptised the whole lot of them and admitted them into full membership of the church, and we've never seen them since!"

That joke is based on the idea that Church Membership is a pretty easy and flimsy, unimportant kind of thing.

Its based on the idea that people will join a church out of convention, or because it's the done thing, or because they looking for something from the church like a baptism or a marriage.

That may once have been true for some, but I don't think there's much of that stuff going on these days.

Weve got about 7 people at the moment who are getting ready to join our church, or at least find out about joining.

For any church it's a good thing (and an encouraging thing) when people choose to become members. Its great to welcome new people.

But in our day and age particularly there's a question that might well be asked by many.

Why would anyone *want* to join a church?

Our society is now avowedly secular. Christianity is seen as totally irrelevant. But it gets worse....

From the outside there are constant attacks and ridicule.

There's the New Atheists who have found their voice in books and the media.

From the inside, Christians themselves are doing a pretty good job of bringing the house down on their own.
Clergy scandals, child abuse, nutcase “christian” politicians...the list goes on...

And there’s more...!

Never mind crazy Christians or angry atheists - the basic image the average person on the street has of Christians these days is pretty frightening.

The Barna Research Foundation in the USA published survey findings on the views of young people on the church.

This was a few years ago. Things may well be worse now!

The average young person reckoned the church was (and this list is in order)
anti homosexual,
judgemental,
hypocritical,
out of touch with reality,
insensitive to others,
old fashioned,
boring,
Conservative,
not accepting of other faiths
superior...

I don’t know about you but I would freak if I reckoned people thought any of these things of me!

And sadly it’s no use protesting that these things aren’t true of *us* or *our* church. I would like to think it wasn’t true of you either, and that is isn’t true of our church family here at Langside.

But the problem remains.

Because even if that’s the case, even if we aren’t guilty of these allegations, if that sad list is really what people think, then that is what they may well be thinking of us.

It means that there is a big challenge ahead to change their minds.
And only we can do that.

So what can we do?

The only thing we can do is to play our part as individuals and as a church family to demonstrate that we are not like those negative stereotypes.

We need to present a different view and a different understanding of faith.

We need to work to build our lives and our church as accepting of others and their differences,

non-judgemental, honest and sensitive and **not** hypocritical,
 in tune with the real world,
 exciting and not boring or stuck in the past.
 Radical and not conservative,
 ready to look out for what God is doing and saying now.
 Ready to put ourselves out for the sake of others,
 ready to support those in need,
 and to make a positive difference in the world.

How do we get to be like that?
 How do we get to be a church like that?

The only solution is for **us** to recover something very important.
 Something that we have lost...

We need to follow Jesus rather than just believing in him.

Us believing won't change other people that much.
 And it won't change us that much either!!!
 It's possible to believe stuff and be unchanged.

The most important thing about us is not what we believe.
 The most important thing about us is who we are.

For example, look at the difference between the Sermon on Mount of Jesus and
 the Creeds that were created later by the early church....
 The Sermon says nothing about beliefs - only actions.
 The Creeds say nothing about actions - only beliefs!

That's why it's possible to have people who believe in God and claim to trust in
 Christ and yet who behave outrageously, treat other people like vermin, and
 have some terrible opinions and prejudices and heartless attitudes in other areas
 of life.

Jesus did **not** say, "*Blessed are they who hear the word of God and believe it.*"
 Jesus did **not** say, "*Blessed are they who hear the word of God and agree with it.*"
 Jesus did **not** even say, "*Blessed are they who hear the word of God and decide to
 join a church.*"
 Jesus said, "*Blessed are they who hear the word of God **and obey it.***"

Obey is a pretty counter-cultural idea.
 We've got rid of that word in our marriage services (- and that's a good thing
 too).
 Isn't the whole point of growing up being free so we no longer have to obey our
 parents?

To obey isn't exactly a hip idea.
 But there are times when "obeying" is the best thing we can possibly do.

Obeying God's will for our life, far from being restrictive, will lead us to live our lives to the full.

Joining a church is a way of lining ourselves up with Jesus and signalling our intent to take him seriously.

Joining a church these days is in itself actually quite radical counter-cultural. It's also a way of saying that you want to reclaim the meaning of 'Christian' from the examples around us that seem to be bringing it down.

I'm not saying that Jesus is not Christ. I believe he is.
I'm not saying that believing in Jesus doesn't matter. Of course it does.

What do you believe about what the Bible says here?

Do you believe that God did this?

What do you think about Hell and the afterlife?

What do you think the church should be doing on this issue of human sexuality?

What do you think Jesus meant when he said that?

There's lots of opportunities for all of us to consider what we believe.

Personally, I love all that stuff.
I love thinking about what I believe.

What's more, let's be frank. You aren't going to follow Jesus if you don't believe in him.

Belief has to be assumed in every Christian.

But here's what I **am** saying.

We have to go one step beyond just believing in our heads, and having the right kind of thoughts.

In the end, it's the following that matters - far more than anything.

Christian minister Robin Meyers wrote a book with a provocative title: "**Saving Jesus From the Church**".

It had a provocative subtitle too.

"How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus."

Can it be bad to worship Christ?

It can - if we use the worship to subtly distance ourselves from him.

What do I mean?

Let's take Brian as an example. (I've just made him up)

"Let's hear it for Brian! What a great guy he is! What a wonderful worker he has been for our company. We owe you a great debt, Brian. You have made this organisation what it is today. Let's show our appreciation for Brian!"

And all the time Brian is thinking to himself – its nice to be praised but Id like it more if other folk joined me instead of just letting me do everything myself.

We do this with Jesus.

“Jesus, you are so great! You stuck so close to God! You have worked hard for our sake. You have gone above and beyond. You have changed the world. We owe you so much! Receive our praise and thanks and honour”.

And all the time Jesus is thinking – it would be good if you just joined in and got involved yourself.

There’s nothing wrong with our praising Jesus, but if that becomes a get out for us doing something or rolling up our sleeves or following, then we are missing the point.

Jesus has indeed done great things.

But what he is asking **us** to do is to follow – to continue that work and to change the world.

That’s not done by us sitting back and praising him on its own.

It’s done by us joining in the work, taking up our role and asking God to show us what God wants **us** to do.

Believing in Jesus costs us little, can distance us from Jesus, and ignores what he actually says to us.

Following Jesus will change our lives, and rest of the world as well.

If we want our lives to be all that they could be, and if we want our church to be as effective as it can be, we need to commit to looking to Jesus in these days of Lent and, indeed, each day, and asking God to show us what we can do to be followers of Jesus in our time.

Anyone considering joining a church should be ready for that.

Anyone who is really part of a church should also be committed to this.

God will guide us if we look to God for direction.

Lets make sure Jesus is really and truly at the centre of both what our community here (and our lives) are all about.

For the sake of our world,
and for our own sake,
and for God’s sake,
let’s get serious about following Jesus.

Luke 11:27-28

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