

Radical Faith

Readings - James 2:14-18 & Mark 2: 1-12

Why do you think our church attendances in the West have dwindled over the years? Churches struggling to find numbers, some churches even close, others amalgamate and others toiling on wondering where the next generation will come from.

We know that many in society have strong views on the church and much of it is negative. There is little to entice, compel or interest people to faith in Christ, let alone come along to church. We hope new initiatives or programmes or the latest fad from overseas will make a difference. Something that will change the tide. We know that the church growth in Richmond is mainly Christians church-hopping from one church to another. New Christian growth is a slow hard slog.

And many people not in church simply create their own kind of religion based more on personal preferences than anything Christian. It has little to do with church involvement and more with a leisurely Sunday brunch or bike ride. And there's one good reason for this – they simply see it as a much better way of enjoying life rather than following the way of Christ.

And who can blame them? Even those in Churches find faith hard to follow completely. There are many people within churches who water down faith to suit their own personal preferences. When the crunch comes most people want a faith that will comfort and protect rather than challenge and upset. There would probably be far more Christians today who would have to walk away with the rich young man who was keen to follow Christ until Jesus told him to see all his possessions and follow him.

There seems to be this unspoken assumption that faith can be hard, challenging... unappealing. And for good reason – it can be! When we look through church history at some of the saints in yesteryear we see that many of them had very hard lives. And yet they are remembered and celebrated for their faith and works. They chose their life and reaped the rewards that were definitely beyond this world.

And there is this belief within us that says that *we* know what *we* want for our faith - better than what the Bible tells us sometimes. Because we ignore the things we don't like and focus on the things we do like. So we could say, 'Look how faithful I am, I come to church every Sunday and I go to a home group. I don't swear or make a scene in public.' But in regards to other things, like perhaps how they spend their money or mingling with people different from them, they are quieter. They call gossip – concern, selfishness is entitled benefit, judgmental attitude is righteous insight and so on... Faith becomes a personal internal stance rather than an outworking sacrificial endeavour. It is comfort over challenge, safety over servanthood.

The whole concept of Christian faith is a huge subject. We have probably heard many sermons on faith and what it means for our life. There are some who say that "true" faith allows us to do incredible things – like healings and miracles. And this has caused many problems when healings or miracles haven't happened and our faith is questioned.

People struggle with faith and wonder where God is. It seems that faith is some kind of mystical power that unleashes the power of God on to things we chose. But more often than not this faith doesn't happen. Sometimes we are simply happy to associate coincidence with miracles. When in truth whatever happened most probably was going to happen anyway – who knows? There wasn't really anything startling about it.

The crowds flocked to Jesus because of the healings that were amazing; things not seen here today. There aren't any news stories on TV of crowds of people being healed of crippling diseases or deafness or blindness. There isn't a crowd of people flocking to get into this church, shall we say, because of the miracles being done here or anywhere.

So isn't it not surprising that there is little attraction to the church from those outside. There is little talk of church news or events other than occasional gossip or controversy.

Society just doesn't really care about the church and most, it seems, wouldn't be too concerned if churches simply disappeared. There may be a slight nostalgic connection but little else.

So we have this reality of a self-centred faith within church and a society who isn't particularly interested in Church or the faith it proclaims.

And those in the church are meant to be the light of the world. Just like Israel, the church was to do what Israel failed to do. But the problem is that it seems the church is falling into the same trap as Israel. Now I know I'm generalising here – but there is a degree of truth. The Church has become rich and comfortable and to some degree inward looking and judgemental. Just like Israel we want people to be like us. We want people to act like us, think like us, look like us. We have become a holy huddle rather than a gracious out pouring of loving kindness. But that is not what the Church is about, is it?

How hard to we fight for the vulnerable, speak for the voiceless, stand up against injustice? How concerned are we for the needy, the lost, the lonely? How gracious are we to the fallen? How accepting are we of the lost? How quick are we to pass judgement...?

The Church isn't here to judge, to draw lines in the sand. This isn't our role. We are here to love and accept, to serve and to bless. Hang out with those people most church people would happily send off to Hell – like the Pharisees did with Jesus' dinner guests of prostitutes and tax collectors – the lowest of the low.

The only one who can draw a line in the sand is Jesus and the last time he did this was to show that no one was in a position to pass judgement... no one!

Some think faith is about becoming some kind of perfect saint. When in truth faith is messy and it's demanding. Faith is about how we treat those we live with. Faith is about the thousands of tiny choices we make every day. The choices about the things we will invest our time, effort and resources into – the things we fight for – the things we ignore.

Faith isn't about how much theology we know or how to act in church services – even though these are the things most clergy train in. Faith is connection with God in a real life changing way – not just for ourselves, but the people we encounter.

The book of James shows that how faith is no mystery. Faith is seen by a person's works. Just as the fruit reveals a tree. There's no hidden

mystery about faith – it is the choices and decisions on how we live. And the truth is that the miracles of faith seen in the Bible aren't actually a big deal. Jesus himself said a mustard seed of faith can move mountains. So it isn't the amount of faith – it is the type of faith we have. Inward or Godward? What fruit do we produce?

We have just celebrated Easter and Christ's victory over sin. The reality of this event is something that in truth has become almost too familiar. We know the story, we know the ending. But do we *truly* know the reality of what it means for us – beyond the things we have grown accustomed to? Does Easter continually challenge *and change* us? Or are we still like babies drinking milk and not growing deeper and deeper in our faith to realise more and more the reality of Christ in our lives? Does it move us to invest ourselves in the Mission of God or the mission of me?

Perhaps.... perhaps God isn't too worried about the things we are worried about... performing great miracles, creating slick programmes, or building a great empire in Richmond, or becoming world renowned... even being a perfect church goer – whatever that may look like.

Perhaps what God is truly interested in is if we take those all-important small steps of faith – like being generous with our resources – be it time or wealth, offering hospitality to those we don't usually associate with, not stressing about silly things everyone else does, but focusing more and more on God working in and through our lives.

The pathway to true enlightenment isn't found in self-righteous attitudes, but self-sacrificial actions. Perhaps this more than anything else will draw us so close to God that people can't help but see the difference it makes in our life. Not what we think, but what we do.

We are here this morning because of one thing and one thing only – God called us. But now it is our responsibility to realise our calling wherever that may lead us, to realise that when we live for Christ we die to self, and the more we truly realise this the more our faith will find true authentic life where anything is possible... for the glory of God.