

What is Church 3

Richard Dawson

20th Feb 2011

Church means community...

Church community is defined by metanoia – by the process of repentance and transformation instigated by the Spirit of God.

Col 2⁶⁻¹⁰/John 3¹⁻¹⁰/ 2 Cor 3¹²⁻¹⁸

Nicodemus the Pharisee is so touched by what has seen and experienced in the company of Jesus that he does something almost unthinkable for Pharisee – he risks all his social position and power by going to see Jesus personally. We could perhaps assume that the act of visiting Jesus at night indicates a certain cowardice on Nicodemus' behalf but given what he stands to lose and not just him but his whole family I think the risk he takes is certainly more impressive than the precaution. John himself affirms this very strong prejudice in chapter 12 where in commenting on the unbelief of the people and especially the Pharisees he says...

⁴²Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God. (John 12)

But Nicodemus is so drawn to Jesus that he risks all to approach Him and to question Him. We may well be impressed and it reinforces the idea that Jesus had tremendous 'pulling power.' He attracted people by the quality of His life, by His teaching and by His power. And it's tempting to think wistfully that things would be so much better if only He would turn up today. The fact of the matter is that He is here and that His witness continues today and that the power of that witness – the witness that drove a fearful man to resist his fear and approach what was, for his sect, the unapproachable – is present in His body – the Church.

The Church is anointed to continue the very same witness begun by Christ and the key aspect of that witness for the Church is the quality of our life together – the so called 'new commandment.'

³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13)

The Church is known by the quality of its community. Of all things the Church is and should be known for this is the one that Jesus says will have the greatest impact on the communities in which we are found. They should say of us 'Look how they love each other!' 'Look how they

forgive each other.' 'Look how they give to each other!' 'Look how they care for each other!' And the Scripture says 'They shall we are Christian by our love...' At Leith 'Growing Great Community' isn't just a goal we have given ourselves which has been drawn from current marketing speak. When we set ourselves this goal as a church we set it because it was a primary biblical function of the Church – to be a great community. The question for us, however, is what does this mean and, perhaps more to the point, how does this happen?

Neither question has an obvious answer though we may assume so. It is perhaps a simple matter to assume that as a Church we should be always happy, always at peace, always praise filled and faith filled and ready to serve the world but does the Bible assume this? One only has to visit the Psalms briefly to discover that while these may be desirable qualities they do not necessarily reflect the reality of our life together. The Psalmist is effusive with praise at times but at other times we find doubt, frustration, anger and even despair reflected there. And so the question arises, did the Psalmist cease to be a part of God's community when he penned these more negative parts of his work? Did he step outside of the community of God when He voiced his frustration and doubt? The answer is an indefatigable 'No!'

David remained a part of God's people even in the face of these things and in Psalm 73 we have him reflecting on just exactly this theme. Listen to this...

**When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
22 I was stupid and ignorant;
I was like a brute beast toward you.
23 Nevertheless I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
24 You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me with honour.
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psalm 73)**

No doubt there are some features of Christian community which are important and which should characterise our fellowship but to imagine that these are what **constitutes** our community is folly because we all know that occasionally or even more than occasionally we will fail in these areas.

So I am not going to start with a 'list' of qualities when dealing with Christian community and this is not to say that we cannot name some important features of our life together and even prioritize them. For us issues such as humility, grace, forgiveness and generosity should be upper most in our life together. But while these things may **describe** our life together they do not constitute it; they do not create it. Something far more fundamental does that and for this we must turn back to Christ's dealings with His own people who were forever seduced by the **appearance of things**. Paul will say this of them...

²⁰If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? ²²All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. ²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. (Col 2)

Laws deal fundamentally in the appearance of things but they have no power to deal with the **heart!** And this is the issue when it comes to community. This is the issue when it comes to truly reflecting the power of God in our lives both individually and together. And it is so because we simply have no power to change how we react to one another unless our hearts have been dealt with by the Spirit of God. No law, no ideal, no goal, no vision, no agreement, no contract, no knowledge – can change who we are together unless the heart has been dealt with. And the heart is a difficult thing.

It is the mainspring of our life; it drives us and it directs us and from it springs all our motivations and desires. It is tide within and the engine of our unconscious and for this reason the Bible with say this of the heart...

**⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt;
who can understand it? (Jer 17)**

When David sins with Bathsheba he knows immediately that the root of his problem is not the law but the unlawful heart and he cries out to God in this regard.

**¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Ps 51)**

For he knows that all the sacrifices in the world are not going to cure him rather...

**¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Ps 51)**

And when the prophet Jeremiah is trying to deal with a people whose sin has led their community to indulge in the most despicable of practices including a complete breakdown of the marriage covenant, theft and murder run wild and last but not least child sacrifice what does God say the solution is? Listen,

¹⁹I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, ²⁰so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Ez 11)

We create godly Christian community friends by dealing first and foremost with our own hearts. Here and only here will we receive the power we need to live in true fellowship with each other.

How then can we deal with our hearts. What does this actually mean?

Let's use Nicodemus as an example. Many commentators down through the years have been pretty negative about him but I think this is completely without warrant and I say that based both on my reading of this passage and on the fact that Nicodemus is mentioned two further times in John's Gospel. In Chapter 7 we find him defending Jesus not in the dark but actually to the Pharisees face so he has now gained the courage to confess him in this very harsh environment. And then in Chapter 19 we find that it was Nicodemus who removed the body from the Cross and who supplied the elements required to properly bury Him. So we discover that his faith has grown and that he clearly considers himself a follower by the end of John's Gospel. So this is a man whose heart was dealt with by God. This is a man who has become a true believer and, furthermore, this is a man who has entered into true fellowship with Jesus' followers. He has been accepted by them and is now contributing to them. So what do we see in Nicodemus that can help us with our hearts.

1. Came to Jesus. In the first place we see him coming to Jesus. Yes it was by night, it was furtive and unsteady and perhaps even doubt filled – but he does it – he opens the door to the Holy Spirit. I can't emphasise enough how important it is for us not just to come to Jesus once but to develop a habit of coming to Him for as we do this we find the doors of heaven fling open wide and the Spirit is able to move in us to change our hearts. If anything characterises us as a people of God it is this – we are they who **come to Jesus!**
2. Offered Jesus what was in his heart – was honest about it. The next thing we see with Nicodemus is that he tells Jesus exactly what he thinks – he offers him what is in his heart – and with Nicodemus we find it is a whole lot of doubt and confusion. Do we see Jesus mocking this offering? Do we see him telling Nicodemus off? DO we see him reject him because of this? No. Jesus receives all that is offered and goes to work on it. Correcting here, challenging there, strengthening here. Whatever we offer to Christ He will not waste. He will use everything changing all into glory for Him. We are they who come to Jesus and who give him all that we are; the so called good and the obviously bad.
3. Received the word Jesus had for him – he believed Jesus. Thirdly we find Nicodemus receiving all that Jesus offers. Yes some of it inspires more questioning on his behalf but we know that he receives it because he does not go away. As I've already said we find him appearing again in John's Gospel, this time brave and defending Jesus and finally pouring out His love for Him by helping to prepare Him for burial. When we meet Jesus

- He always comes with a Word for us. It may be as simple as 'I love you' but whatever it is we must receive it and believe it and we will find ourselves changed forever.
4. Act upon that Word. Nicodemus did act upon Christ's word to him. How did He act? He acted by lifting up the Son of God – by defending Him and loving Him even in death. Nicodemus heard Jesus say that the Son of God must be lifted up as Moses had lifted up the snake in the desert and when this was done we would receive eternal life. This act, this acting upon the words of Jesus, this following of Him is the final step in dealing with our own hearts. If we are to truly bring these hearts into submission to God we need to go! We need to work, we need to act. As the saying goes nothing beats having 'flesh in the game.' Nothing beats actually contributing, actually sacrificing something of ourselves; actually offering more than just mental assent to Christ. Somehow the Spirit of God needs us to give of ourselves if our hearts are really to be finally changed.

When our hearts are changed we will find ourselves able to form the sort of community that is truly great and which has the same power and influence that Christ Himself exerted. Where is your heart today?