

BACK TO CHURCH SUNDAY

A few weeks back in church four of our congregation delivered mini-talks one after the other. They had all been given a brief to speak about what God and the Church meant to them. The people involved were David Burrows (who works for an international camera chip company), Richard Bacon (an international sales executive), Elizabeth Gibbs (one of our Church Wardens and a former teacher at Rodborough School) and Phil Lewis (an IT consultant for a multi-national company). All four have trained as 'Occasional Preachers' for All Saints.

The results of their challenge were so good that I thought they deserved a wider airing! In particular, it's fascinating to see how a single brief produced such varied responses when filtered through four different personalities. I hope you enjoy reading them and I am most grateful to David, Richard, Elizabeth and Phil for the careful thought that went into their talks.

Brian Shand

What God and the Church mean to me- David Burrows

What God means to me

I have had a very technical education, spending 7 years at University to complete my degree & PhD in electronics. I chose to pursue a career in Microelectronics, designing circuits and now leading teams of designers of digital camera chips in the UK, Europe and India. Throughout my life I have continued to study scientific, technological and engineering research and I take a keen interest in the underlying physics behind all of this. I regularly read about the latest discoveries in many other areas of science, from genetics to astronomy, climate change to medicine. As we continue to learn more and more we have had to create increasingly sophisticated theories and models of the universe to explain our observations.

But I like to ask the "why" question now and again. To anyone expounding "how" something works or "what" the latest theory is, just ask the question "why" a few times and they soon either run out of ideas or suggest that is not the right question to ask. The beautiful, enormous, magnificent universe we live in, from the smallest component of the atom to the largest galaxy in the sky, is ultimately inexplicable in purely scientific terms. We know how we got here, we have an idea what makes us tick, but I think there is only one answer to the "why" question. At the heart of creation, at the root of all knowledge, at the core of our being is God.

What the Church means to me.

The purpose of our own lives is the hardest question we all face; why are we here, what is our real role, how should we live together. God does not control us like robots; God has given us the complete freedom to do right and wrong. As such, he might seem to be uncaring and unconcerned about us; but this isn't the case. 2,000 years ago he sent a man to be amongst us, to show us why are we here, what is our real role, how should we live together. This man preached a message of love between each other and between us and God. This man explained the real meaning of life and presented the answer to the "why" question. But we are not perfect; we have free will, we do wrong and wrong is done to us. God sent his son Jesus to show us the right way to live, and how to say sorry when things go badly.

The Church of England helps us understand all this by explaining the story of Jesus' life and how it relates to us here today. Witley All Saints is a special place for me to learn about the bible

and deepen my knowledge of God. All Saints is a very warm, welcoming, friendly and uplifting church to newcomers. It is also a wonderfully supportive community, offering help and encouragement to all its members through both spiritual and practical means. I find I am not alone here through life's ups and downs. I often leave feeling listened to, understood and touched by God. The rest is just simple physics.

What God and the Church mean to me – Richard Bacon

So some of us have had quite a moment of conversion – for others of us, like me, it has been a life-long journey. Something nurtured by parents in a number of different places in the world and in quite differing styles of worship as we moved to several different countries. A home life supported by a school life strongly held in the Anglican tradition with a routine of attendance at services, harvest festivals, Christmas Carol services and a lot of music in which I was an active participant. So no moment of great conversion for me – which I sometimes regret, for I admire deeply those who have made a dramatic choice in their lives.

Faith must be kept **alive** and like any plant needs regularly watering – for me coming to Church does help that. I often imagine my own faith as being a plant growing up through the thorns of life. There are many distractions along the way, but the plant continues to grow towards the Light. I think we must always keep our faith fresh, and try hard not to let it become stale and caught in mere tradition and ritual. I am conscious that one of the risks that comes with my sort of experience is that the whole thing can become something of a “habit” – and that the spiritual muscle that I think we all have is not exercised or developed and loses its zest.

So I have tried to force myself out of my comfort zone - volunteering to lead prayers here – helping to lead the “Young Saints Sunday” school group, – and doing the occasional preachers course. More recently I was asked to help lead a “house group” which has turned out to be a really fascinating set of discussions between people of very differing faith experiences with the catalyst of a book such as Sanctuary (available at the back) to provide a loose framework for our meeting. I think with all of these experiences, it has certainly been the case that I have felt that I have learned most when stepping out of the comfort zone. And developing faith has rarely been a solo activity – it usually is supported by others – and each in the group adds their own particular reflection of God and his purpose which encourages the wholeness of all.

Now with a young family, of course I am trying to pass on something that I hope is a core part of me. To continue the gardening analogy I often see myself as a somewhat over-enthusiastic gardener, at high risk of trampling the green shoots of faith in them with my enthusiasm. But with God's help I hope I can help nurture something good and lasting in them. For me, All Saints has much to offer children, and this has always been a litmus test for whether a church is on the right track or not.

I feel I have been very lucky in many aspects of my life – and I thank God for that. But there have been a number of very dark moments too: the sudden and unexpected death of my mother, the tragic death of a dearly loved brother and others. And it has been at these moments of desolation that I think I have come closer to God – you may have heard of that famous poem called Footsteps in the Sand (www.footprints-in-the-sand.com or cards available at the back of church) If I look back at those moments in my life when suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, it is these moments when I believe my relationship with God has carried me forward – and it may well be the same for you.

We tend to say a church is not a building – it is all the people that make it up. But I do like Church buildings – I think the atmosphere of a place where people have worshipped and prayed

for many years brings a special sense to it. I love Church organs – and Church organ music – especially loud organ music. Nimrod in St Pauls Cathedral on Remembrance Sunday – something that moved me to the very core. I am a member of the choir and music has always been part of my journey of faith.. The anthem we are singing later on today is “The Lord Bless You and Keep You”. It not only has the most perfect words and melody – but it also in many ways characterises my own journey of faith. Written by John Rutter in memory of a man who taught him music and me the piano, and first performed by our school choir at this teacher’s memorial service, it was also the piece of music I turned to at the death of my mother – and more happily for my wedding and at various other occasions in my life. So like my faith this music is something that has been there throughout my life and I have turned to in moments of great sadness and great joy.

I have attended services in my travels in places with full rock bands and one even where Father Christmas roared down the aisle on a large motor bike. But for me this – All Saints Witley - is much closer to “home”.

What Church means to me: Elizabeth Gibbs

I was born into a Christian home and went to Church as a child with my parents. My mother’s family had always gone to Church – my grandmother was in the Mother’s Union for over 50 years so Church was always ‘there’.

In my early adult life and at College, through Church, I met some remarkable people who I admired very much. They were not ‘holy Joes’ but their faith – they way they tried to live their faith – made a huge impression on me who was still young in the faith.

They showed me that we don’t need to have all the answers – God has given us free will and a brain to question and analyse. There will often be doubts – all the great Saints had them. But the Bible is there for us to read and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus give us the absolute proof of the existence of a loving God.

Human nature means that we often feel we have to be in control but we don’t – I have learned that God is dependable and that as we dare to show our vulnerability. He is there for us to lean on. All we have to do is simply ask him.

It has been a privilege to work as one of the Church Wardens and with the Pastoral Assistants here at All Saints. Working with parents who bring their children for baptism or visiting the elderly housebound or sick in hospital.

I know God has been with me all through my life – on many occasions. I have recognized this very, very vividly. All those so called ‘coincidences’ have been the result of God’s guiding hand.

In the last six years my life has been quite bumpy and the outlook is not good but the wonderful friends I have in His Church family are a reflection of God’s love. I know he continues to support me and will keep me afloat in the years to come whatever happens. Without his very real presence I would have sunk without trace already.

What God and the Church means to me: Phil Lewis

Whilst I cannot claim to have had a blinding conversion on the road to Damascus – or even Godalming – I have had a somewhat different faith journey to the ones you’ve heard this morning.

Unlike my fellow occasional preachers who have maintained a relationship with God and the Church throughout their lives, I went through what you could describe as an extended spiritual gap year...well, one lasting several decades actually.

It's hard for me to remember exactly how this came about; but I know that there was a time when, as a child, I used to go to Church every Sunday and then, gradually, I stopped. Perhaps even in those childish days it was due to the many 'exciting' things that competed for time and attention simply pushing God and the Church down the list. Though, my childhood memories of the extremely austere Church I attended "...next stop Hell if you don't get it right..." also go some way to explaining why I stopped going!

And this separation, as I now know, with the benefit of my current perspective, was a sad thing - a lost opportunity. It's not the case that it brought about a rapid spiral of degeneration where I gradually turned to the dark side. No, it was less dramatic, more subtle, than that. I slipped from a kind of mooring and began to drift...aimlessly.

There was a lot to occupy me as I drifted along...more 'exciting' things and goals to put on and cross off my to-do list ...consuming my time.

But, increasingly, and particularly when I found myself in uncertain or choppy waters – as we all do from time to time – my sense of not being anchored into something of a greater purpose and meaning became very real and stark. All this in spite of the love and support from my wife and children. I arrived at, what people call today a tipping point –even when things were not choppy, my sense of disconnection was overwhelming.

I started just sitting during my lunchtimes in a church (well actually Southwark Cathedral) close to where I worked - coming back on land, as it were. I also started coming to this beautiful Church; first passively and then more regularly and actively.

But the Church is not this building – as we heard in our reading this morning "God...does not live in shrines made by human hands."

The Church is all of us: you and me. And it was and is this Church that formed the mooring point to secure me from drifting. It is this Church that nurtures, supports and encourages through its individuals and its groups: such as the Enquiry Group I attended which reacquainted me with my Faith and demystified what it is to be a Christian and to live, act and pray as one.

I am blessed with a young family: both my wife and I have jobs. Like many of you, the pressures on our time, particularly with the childrens' boggling array of weekend activities, can be immense.

It can be hard sometimes to "schedule in" time for Church and God.

I have no magic answer to this but I would say that, for me, any week that does not start here in this building with this Church community leaves me feeling that something has been missed. And any day when I cannot or do not set aside even a small amount of time to reflect – to pray - leaves me with a nagging sense that I've got my priorities wrong and that, perhaps, I'm filling my time with less important things...which sounds a lot like drifting....