

Welcome, RAFA, poignant cos 911; but we're also going to be celebrating the *positive* things that God's doing in the world today and in a few moments we're going to commission ALMS. So we're giving thanks for the past, the present and the future all of which are in God's hands...

So before young people go out to Sunday clubs, we are going to commission the 5 people in our congregation who have recently completed their training as ALMs or alms. So I can ask them to come to the front along with our two existing ALMS, Tom Platt and Ann Pierce. So Tom trained and now functions as a pastoral assistant, Anne as a mission enabler and we are about to commission:

Well as I said, it's rather poignant that our annual commemoration of the Battle of Britain has this year coincided with the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks. And while these were both cataclysmic events that traumatised, in one case, the people of this country and in the other, the whole world, it occurred to me, as I was preparing for this service, that there really couldn't be more difference between the people who flew Hurricanes and Spitfires over the skies of Kent to defend their country from invasion in 1940 and the people who hijacked passenger planes and deliberately crashed them into buildings full of civilians in 2001, killing, as we know, 1000s of people and making widows and orphans of many thousands more. No doubt Mohammed Atta, the trained pilot who flew the first plane into the world trade center had managed to *delude* himself that he too was defending his people, the nation of Islam from the imperialist

aggression of the Great Satan, the United States of America but that just goes to show that Blaise Pascal (the philosopher) was right when he said that ‘Men never do evil so completely and so cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction’.

Now of course Christians aren’t exactly ‘without sin’ in this area themselves so it’s hard for us to cast stones – or at least it should be: we all know about the crusades and the inquisition and if we wanted to say that that’s all ancient history and that mainstream Christianity has long since rejected the idea of holy war and that it’s only the lunatic fringe of the lunatic fringe who do things like... shoot abortionists or, a more recent tragedy which actually touched us here in Wye, massacre innocent students in Norway, well, I’m sure that most Muslims

would say the same thing; that Al Qaeda and co are gross distortion of true Islam not authentic expressions of it.

But the fact remains that the church still has blood on its hands even if most of it’s been wiped off and that’s *one* of the reasons why many people no longer want anything to do with Christianity in general or even with God Himself. As Saint Paul said in his letter to the Romans “God’s name is blasphemed among the gentiles because of you”. Us.

There are other reasons too, of course, such as the problem of suffering in general and the perceived conflict between science and religion and those are the kinds of things we talk about at Agnostics Anonymous, the informal discussion group that meets in the New Flying Horse once a month so if *you* have a friend or family member who struggles to believe for those sorts of reasons, why not

suggest that they go along to that? The worst that can happen is that they have an evening of vigorous debate in a pleasant atmosphere. With beer. Or diet coke in my case.

But what about people who *do* believe in God but don't go to church? Well, we know there are lots of them. Most surveys report that 40-50% of the population believe in God (although it's hard to reconcile with the fact that 70% of us claimed to be Christians in the **x** census; call me old-fashioned but I would suggest that you can't be a Christian without believing in God! You can be a nice *person*, you might even be a nicer person than most *Christians* but it's not the same thing). But whatever percentage of us *do* believe in God, 40, 50 or even 70, only 15% of us go to church regularly. So at least 25% of the population, it would seem fair to say, believe in God but don't really go to church. Well, why not?

Well according to the organisers of the Back to Church Sunday campaign, it's because no-one has invited them. So there's people who might have gone in the past, perhaps when they were children, but they feel *guilty* because it's been so long. Like that letter you *should* have written but the longer you leave it, the harder it is. Or it may be that they're not sure what to wear, what the rules are; it's all a bit alien, another culture. And it might even be more basic than that; they simply haven't got round to it having moved to a new area; or since having kids or whatever.

Well, in all these cases, the research suggests, a simple invitation ('would you like to come to church this Sunday?') *may* be all they need to say yes and come and hopefully, they'll like what they find and keep coming back. So the idea of Back to Church Sunday which this

year we'll be observing on the 2nd October is that each of us prayerfully chooses one person to invite to come to church with us that Sunday and if all of us did that and each of our invitees came, we would literally double our congregation for that day and hopefully increase it, going forwards.

Now I'm aware that many people would rather be whipped naked through the streets of Aberdeen than ask someone to come to church with them. If that seems like a bizarre image I'm quoting from Blackadder, as some of you will recognise. And if that's how you feel, then you'll probably do more harm than good by forcing yourself to ask your neighbour what you consider an embarrassing question. They'll feel embarrassed as well, they probably won't come and it'd be even harder to ask them the next time.

You'll also note that I said we *pray* about who we invite and there's all the difference in the world between invading someone's space like a pushy salesperson on the phone or an overenthusiastic chugger – you know what I mean by chuggers? Charity muggers in red or purple aprons who accost you on the streets of Ashford or Canterbury and try and make you sign a direct debit form on the spot. There's a huge difference between what they do and inviting someone to church who God himself has been preparing for your invitation...

Rowan Williams, our Archbishop, once said that mission, a word, like evangelism, that some people are uncomfortable with, is finding out what God is doing and getting involved. Well, what I'm inviting you to do today is to find out what God's doing in your street, in your workplace, who he's in the process of drawing to Himself,

by praying about it and then getting involved by inviting that person to come to church with you on the 2nd October. Now I'm going to do that myself. I don't know who I'm going to invite yet. I'm going to pray about it. And obviously I believe that God answers prayer. Not always clearly but whenever I've prayed for *guidance* I've received it... eventually. My spiritual *director* once said that God not only leaves it to the 11th hour but generally to about 11.59 and 59 seconds and that's been my experience. But he does come through eventually. So, ask and it *will* be given to you; seek, and you *will* find. And if the person you subsequently ask is indeed someone who God has been preparing, well the chances are they'll say yes.

Now I'm not suggesting that when you pray you'll hear a voice from Heaven say 'Invite Mrs Miggins from number

39' In fact I'd probably be quite worried about you if you did. But if while you're praying, Mrs Miggins pops into your mind or you bump into her in the Co-op 10 minutes later and she happens to say 'You know, I haven't been to church for ages, I really ought to go some time...' well, a) that's what I would call an answered prayer and things like that happen to me all the time; not because I'm a vicar but because I pray and expect them to. And b) that's your opportunity to say 'Well, funnily enough, next Sunday is what we call Back to Church Sunday'.

And if even *that* feels a bit too scary for you, well you could try focussing on the fact that the 2nd October is Harvest Sunday as well so you could tell them that we need tinned food or fresh fruit (but not vegetables) for Foodstep, a homeless charity in Folkestone so if they'd like to bring some along on that day they'd be very

welcome cos it's a special service for people who aren't regular churchgoers. With cake afterwards. That'd do it for me...

So, a challenge for some of us and an opportunity for all of us and if you'd like to know more about Back to Church Sunday please talk to me or Ann our authorised mission enabler after the service. But it's encouraging to know that while at times evil seems to be triumphing in the world, the kingdom of God continues to grow, as our next hymn says, soul by soul and silently. Thanks be to God.