

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*  
**SUNDAY SERMON**

*Sermon preached on Good Friday  
Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 19th April 2019*

Guilty as charged?

Imagine, you are arrested and put on trial. Your alleged crime: you are a Christian. Would there be enough evidence to convict you?

In the early days it would have been relatively easy - you would only have needed to state that "Jesus is Lord" and you'd have been off to the arena to feed the lions quicker than you could say "Here, kitty, kitty", but would that be enough now?

In communist countries, Christianity has only relatively recently begin to be tolerated. Until then the question regarding sufficient evidence for a conviction was often written on posters in those countries which challenges us, since it requires us to look for the proof that we are truly Christians. It isn't enough to simply say "I live in a Christian country". Still less is it sufficient to declare that you had been brought up as a Christian or even whether or not you were baptised. Something more is needed.

Some may point to their attendance record at church services and try to argue that this demonstrates their Christianity; in fact, all it demonstrates is that they are present at the appropriate time physically - whether they are mentally or spiritually present is a different state of affairs entirely! Being in a church building doesn't make you a Christian.

Some turn that phrase around and state "I don't need to be in church to be a Christian. And it's true - you don't need to go to church to be a Christian. But we need to remember that a church is a community and that it is as a community that we are actually supposed to function.

The Bible has no concept of individual spirituality: Christianity is not seen as something personal that has nothing to do with anyone else but this is a very modern way of thinking. Traditionally, if you are a Christian, then you are a member of God's Church. The Church is now your family, and they are God's gift to you in living a Christian life. God is in the business of making a family. This can also be seen in the fact that most of the instructions for Christians are done in the plural, there are very few (if any) instructions to individuals.

The Christian life was never meant to be lived solo, God has gifted each member of his Church to serve one another, you can't do that on your own. It is nearly impossible to live a Christian life alone, it runs counter to everything God has done for us. However, some people can't help but live alone. The thief on the cross, for example, could not join a church, he had no choice; but where we have a choice, we really should become a part of God's Church.

It's like someone who gets married, but never moves in with their partner. It is true that you can be married without living together, and there may be extreme circumstances that you can think of where someone may choose to get married and not live together. But a real marriage involves relationship. Becoming a Christian means being a part of God's family.

Now, as we've already noted, being a member of a church isn't really enough to convict you of being a Christian. Even the very method by which you came to faith is insufficient evidence to produce a guilty verdict. I know some fundamental Christians, as Gemma mentioned a couple of weeks ago, who don't consider many of us to be Christians because we haven't had our own, personal, "road to Damascus" experience, but have, instead, come to our present positions through many years of listening to the still small voice of calm. Remember, Jesus told us never to judge others and that includes the method by which we came to know him. Indeed, it isn't any of our business whether other people are real Christians or not and it certainly isn't our position to decide. The only question we should ask is "Am I a Christian?"

And we have our own litmus test for this which Jesus gave us himself. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The evidence for faith is loving behaviour; it's the fruit that proves that the roots are sound. When Jesus talks of love he isn't talking about mushy emotions- his commandment is to do with the way we treat each other. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another". So how does he love us?

If you read the Gospels you will see that his love was special as he loved the whole human race. He wasn't restricted by national prejudices - he loved Roman soldiers, a Canaanite woman, and the Greeks who came to learn from him. He loved his own nation but he understood its faults. He loved his home town even though he was without honour there. He loved the outcasts - the tax collectors, prostitutes and all the others. He loved his closest friends - even Judas - and told them to love each other.

Most importantly, he loves us as individuals. He wanted to find out about people and loved them for what made each one unique. Then he found out their needs - sometimes knowing even better than they knew themselves - and then set about meeting those needs. His was an active love; one which led to practical service, healing and restoring people and releasing their hidden potential. That's how he loves each one of us. And that's how he commanded us to love each other; inclusively, tolerantly and as individuals to be encouraged, respected and deserved.

If we love each other as he loved us, then in the charge of being a Christian you can be certain of a guilty verdict. And the best evidence of that love is when we come together as a family and have a meal together at the family table, in the Eucharist.