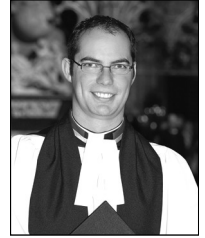


Vicar's Letter



Dear Friends,

A few years ago, whilst standing on a street corner collecting money for Christian Aid during Christian Aid Week, I was approached by a young man and asked if I was a Christian. The fact that I was wearing a clerical collar and cassock with a red sash across my chest emblazoned with the words "Christian Aid" didn't seem to matter. And it wasn't that the young man was from a different country or culture and had never seen a Church of England cleric before. It was that he was using the term "Christian" in a very particular way. On another occasion I was once told by someone that, in her opinion, 'there are very few Christians left!' Again she was using the term "Christian" in a very particular way.

These little incidents show how much the word "Christian" has changed for some people. Language, as we know, is not static and keeps changing. You just have to read any of Susie Dent's books to see that. We therefore need to keep alert to possible misunderstandings as change happens.

The first people to be termed "Christian" were the followers of Jesus Christ in Antioch. The Acts of the Apostles, where this reference first appears, shows this term was applied to the followers by outsiders and it seems to suggest that they thought that "Christ" was a name rather than a title. The term only appears 2 other times in the New Testament, yet it stuck.

Skip forward 2000 years to today, and there seem to be 3 main uses of the term. The first is of a particular sort of follower of Jesus. The characteristic features of this approach to the term "Christian" include a tendency towards a literal view of the Scriptures, a strong emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a fairly conservative approach to ethical issues, and a belief in local churches rather than the Church universal. Those from this tradition often regard Anglican clergy as a bit 'iffy'. We are seen as too institutionalised and a bit liberal when it comes to scriptural or ethical matters; hence the views expressed to me earlier.

The second modern use of this term is at the other extreme where the word "Christian" is used to mean generally good. For instance, those who say "you don't need to go to church to be Christian" usually mean that you don't have to go to church to be a good person. They may well have a general belief in Jesus Christ, but they do not necessarily put it into practice and would struggle to define what they mean. For them the term "Christian" has a very broad meaning.

The third modern (and in fact historical) use of the term is by all who try to follow Jesus Christ and are baptised into his Church. This is the view many favour and is certainly where I can be found. By "Church" we mean any of the main orthodox Christian communities. It is right to have a broad definition, but also to have some boundaries. It is not our job to decide 'who is in' or 'who is out' – that's God's business not ours. This is not a matter of watering down the faith so that it means nothing. It is always the task of the Church to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ afresh to every generation in a way that challenges and inspires them at the deepest level. It is also the job of the Church to welcome all who, in the words of the Baptism Service, turn to Christ.

This month, as we celebrate afresh the outpouring of God's Spirit upon his Church let us pray that the Body of Christ may move beyond the differences in language and style to being more Christ-centred and active in the community, and that we may grow in respect and understanding of one another.

Every blessing in Christ,

Mike