

## 205 'Who is my neighbour?'

In relation to my work, I just met 'Rev John Smith', and we started to chat about faith. How do I explain to him what I now believe? Why am I so happy in the church I found five years ago? (Indeed, why am I so happy with the faith direction I'm travelling now?)

The first good sign was the feeling that 'Everyone in this church is so welcoming!' – and loads of people say the same, including local people *who don't come to church* (my neighbour said exactly that yesterday). The second thing we noticed was the wide range of churchmanship: high, low, charismatic, traditional. No, I'm not saying it's the ideal church, but *something* is different.

As my articles attest, I set about thinking, 'Well, what *do* I believe? What *does* the Bible teach?' and so I have challenged what 'the (evangelical) church' has taught me for almost 50 years.

Latterly, I've been grappling with why the C21 church is so different from the C1 church, and I think I'd express it in a single word: community.

In the OT, God tried to drum into the Jews the importance of caring for the outcast and the stranger and making them part of the community. Then Jesus taught his disciples the same thing, and the C1 church epitomised it.

And what does society need most today? Community. In a society where individualism is rife – every man for himself – we need to work together in community: locally, regionally, nationally, internationally.

I'm really proud of my son, Tim, who is battling against individualism in education, encouraging schools to become better learning *communities*; in particular, he's trying to build an accreditation system that values the individual, and yet places top priority on schools being better communities.

While the religious of Jesus' day taught individualism, the C1 church taught inclusion – they even (eventually) welcomed Gentiles into the church! That inclusivity, I believe, is why it grew so very rapidly. Yes, miraculous things happened, but what convinced people that this was a real work of God – and so they wanted to be part of it – was the transformed life of the community.

I believe that, as churches, we need to battle against 'sin', where 'sin' is anything that destroys community, that puts me and my needs and wants above those of others. But sin also takes the form of structural evil – aspects of society that crush the individual and destroy community.

As churches we need to affirm people who, like my Tim, are fighting to create a better society, regardless of their faith allegiance. We need to work together with people of all faiths and none.

Yes, Jesus is distinctive, but if our main aim in life, as Christians, is to tell everyone else (including people in other churches!) that we are right, and they are wrong, then the whole world will disintegrate into self-seeking individualism: locally, regionally, nationally, internationally.