

After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. Acts 21.1.

You might think that verse a pretty dull bit of narrative with nothing for us. But look again. See how emotional it is. 'We' (ie Luke, the author of *Acts*, Paul, and their friends), had to 'tear themselves away from' the Ephesians elders. At the end of ch20, v37, we read that they were *weeping* because they knew they would never see Paul again... Do you find that a little surprising? We tend to think of St Paul as a bit grumpy and serious, and who made the simple message of Jesus unnecessarily complicated. But just read our passage. The people absolutely *loved* Paul. They wept over him. When they arrived at Tyre, they *begged* him not to go to Jerusalem, 21.4... Not just the disciples, but the women and children came down to the beach with Paul to pray together, v5... Again, they *plead* with Paul not to go to Jerusalem; they *loved* him, vv12-14... And look at the end of *Romans*, ch16 on p1142 to see the long list of Paul's friends. Paul was no grump...

What I am seeing in this passage is how *personal* Christianity is. It's all about *relationships*, friendships. They all *know* each other, and care about each other. Wherever Paul, Luke and the rest of them go around the Mediterranean, they have friends. Just look at 21.7 where we meet Philip again. Remember him? He was one of the 7 chosen to be a deacon, with Stephen. He converted the Ethiopian eunuch. Now we learn that he has four daughters. It's all so personal and real, isn't it? And then there are more friends from Caesarea who take them to the home of Mnason, vv15-16...

Have you noticed of late in the media the hostility to this thing called 'organised religion'? It's as though 'religion' is bad enough, but *organised* religion? It's all so sinister, with evil clerics trying to control and manipulate people. But is 'organised religion' always of this sort? Aren't families 'organised'? Does that make them evil? Isn't education 'organised'? Isn't work 'organised'? Aren't even holidays 'organised'? What's wrong with things being organised?

I suppose what many people mean is that religion is a personal thing, and you should believe and practise whatever you want without anyone telling you what to do. But that is just pure indulgence. Christianity isn't just about following your urges. It's about Jesus Christ who actually lived, and who actually claimed to be THE TRUTH. Christianity is also essentially about *relationships* - mending our broken relationship with God, and our relationships with each other.

So you can't really be a Christian on your own. If it is relational, you need to be with other people. The whole world is in a bad way, because our relationships are not right. Marriages and friendships are going wrong because we're not treating each other properly. We've ignored Jesus's teaching that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We've ignored the Cross with the love that sacrifices rather than takes. Countries are at war, neighbours are rowing, because our relationships are not right. Jesus came to deal with the sin, the selfishness, which ruins our relationships.

The Cross has two beams: the upright beam which speaks of our relationships with God, and his with us, and the horizontal

beam which speaks of our relationship with each other. Christianity isn't a solitary pursuit. It's a contact sport. And that's why we have this thing called the Church. We may not always *like* each other, but then, again, we're not here just for what we like. We're here to put others first, to give others a chance, to accept people we wouldn't ordinarily choose. We're not here to pray to *my* Father for *my* daily bread, but to *our* Father for *our* daily bread.

It is said that it takes a whole village to raise a child. Well, it takes a whole church congregation to raise a Christian. We're all here for each other. If you want to call that 'organised', then so be it. But I see nothing sinister or controlling in that. In this church I do not feel controlled and manipulated. Rather the opposite. In the church I feel cared for, and loved and supported, and I know many people who can say the same. We don't always behave very well, but what *family does?*

And isn't this the point of Holy Communion? Union? We are at one with God through Jesus who died to take away that wretched sin which keeps mucking up our lives and spoiling everything. And we're at one with each other, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We're all at the Table together. We may all be different, but we all need to be fed. The Bible is full of meals. It's all very Jewish. And we're told that heaven is going to be one great banquet, where we all sit down together at the Messiah's table and have a great time as brothers and sisters. This holy communion is a glimpse of what we shall be doing for the rest of eternity, so you'd better get used to it!