

Person Centred Church - Introduction

Luke 7:11-16

What is your picture of Church?

A little while back someone asked me, “what is your picture of church?” In other words, what are we about? What’s my vision? What do I think is important in a church? It seemed to me that there are lots of “right” answers to that question put in general terms, but if you’re asking me personally, then it comes down to a very personal answer. The question is “What kind of a church do I want to be part of, or would I like to be minister of?” It’s not so much a quest for the “perfect church” but, what kind of church will emerge when Richard Dormandy is the Vicar.

As I explore the answer to this question over the next few weeks, you may find yourself disagreeing in places, but I expect you’ll resonate with a lot of it for the simple reason that we find ourselves still here together. The further question is, therefore, how do we make the most of this kind of church? How might it work best for God’s reign among us, communicated to those outside?

As I thought about what was really important to me in a church, everything I considered came back time and again to “people”. All the good things I’ve known have been about people growing and loving becoming more human, and all the bad things I’ve known have been about people being squashed or marginalised.

Person-centred?

I therefore came up with the title “Person-Centred” Church. Some people are immediately concerned about this. Shouldn’t we be talking about the “God-centred” or “Christ-centred” church? Of course – but I take it as read that churches seek to be God-centred or Christ-centred. The question is, how do we express that? One of the first things I’ll say next week is that God is essentially personal – three persons in communion – the Trinity.

Other people have heard of Carl Rogers’ “Person-Centred” approach counselling and are nervous that I’m trying to build a theological and spiritual entity on some humanist philosophy. Well it’s true that in the 1960s Carl Rogers did develop an approach to counselling called “the Person Centred approach” and I’ve always found that phrase very attractive. Indeed, many Christian therapists find themselves naturally inclined towards his kind of approach. What I’m offering however, doesn’t come from that direction at all – the coincidence is mainly one of name, although we may find some interesting overlaps as we go along. My vision comes from the heart – the things I really care about – the areas on which I’d find it hard to budge, or to put it another way, the things I’m passionate about. It’s pretty simple really – it’s all about people and what happens to them. And as I read the gospels in particular, I find it pretty much in keeping with what Jesus is also passionately concerned for.

An Angry Explosion

One of my formative church experiences happened when I was about 18. I had a friend staying for the weekend, called Martin. Martin came from Plumstead. He had a funny voice, was only just learning to read at the age of 20, not terribly sophisticated - though he once proudly told me having just had a shower at camp “I'm a civilisation – as for you, you smell depression!” But Martin had a great heart and a sincere love of God and people. On the Sunday morning I took him to my local church. We stood near the back – the vicar seemed a mile away with his voice wafting down the nave. We all had little black prayer books with hundreds of densely printed pages, which the rest of the congregation magically knew their way about, and then the vicar launched into the Lord's Prayer at a breakneck speed. I realise now that the way he did it wasn't intended to be rejecting, but this was in fact the *only* part of the spoken service that Martin had any chance of joining in with, and he was totally excluded.

I can still recall vividly the sense of anger exploding within me. Why did this situation cause such a reaction? Why was I so incensed? Something was clearly very important to me. I came to realise that it is people. The church I took Martin to was what I'd now call a “form-centred” church – it was formalist – what mattered was repeating the same order in the same way, that the service went on and hopefully that faithful people attended.

Form-Centred Church

It was a less extreme version of a notice I found in one chapel which read, “You are encouraged to participate by remaining silent.” The vicar of that church was dedicated in pastoral work but if you looked at how the church worked, or how people experienced it, relationships or persons, were not at the centre – and nor did many members wish it that way.

Some people might say that we're too formalist at this church and if it's about making a place more person-centred then I'm always open to that kind of discussion. Those who belong to the “organic church” movement in the United States believe that *any* institutional type church service squashes people and inhibits the work of Jesus and the Spirit. But the question isn't just about what you get rid of, it's about *why* you might do that, *what* you might put in its place, and what *effect* that might have on people.

What other centres might you have in a church?

Doctrine-Centred Church

Some churches are “doctrine-centred”. I went somewhere where everything was explained – every song and every prayer had a little sermon attached so that all the time this church's fairly narrow teaching but good teaching was drip fed. Churches like that are very good at ensuring that everyone's “on message” but there tends to be a uniformity about them and it can be problematic if you don't fit or are a theological dissident.

The New Testament places a high premium on reliable and faithful teaching, but sometimes we claim too much for our knowledge and it stifles the work of the Spirit in the lives of people. Someone I know applied for a vicar's job. One question was, "What would you do if someone in the congregation told you they felt they had a word or prophecy from God?" His reply was, "I'd take them back to the vicarage and explain from Scriptures why they must be wrong." Well, it may or may not be sound teaching but it certainly would have stifled the Spirit in that church.

A doctrine-centred church usually comes about with best of motives, but notice how in the gospels, those who placed the heaviest loads were the teachers of the Law. Jesus, by contrast was always apparently breaking the law, breaking down barriers and crossing boundaries, like in our reading: he simply *had* reach out to the dead boy in that funeral procession because "**his heart went out**" to the mother. The person was far more important than any teaching about "clean and unclean."

Experience-Centred Church

A second kind of church might be called "experience-centred" - the dynamic and perhaps overwhelming experience of God is all-important and all-affirming. Everything else is accredited by it. And such churches have a genuine ministry. A young man called Billy came to my last church, fresh out prison for drug related offences. After a few weeks he said, "Your church is nice, but do you know where I can get a real lift? I need more of a boost to take me through the coming week." Billy needed the zapping of an experience-centred church – and I told him a place where he could find it.

Trouble comes when you're not wired up like that – people easily feel second-class because all the shaking, falling down, visions, tongues seem to happen to everyone else. People pray with them, plead with them, analyse them, but nothing changes. A friend of mine went to a church like that, but the experience she felt they they wanted her to have either just didn't happen or didn't add up in her life. Eventually she became depressed, saw herself as a failure, and eventually saved herself by becoming a rebel. Now she's much happier going to a church where they all feel like rebels or heretics.

The New Testament encourages us to expect a tangible encounter with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, and there's a pattern that can be discerned. But Jesus' main concern is to meet people where they're at. The crucial thing isn't precisely *how* you meet with Jesus or *how* the Spirit speaks to you, but rather that you *do* meet and *are* transformed by the Spirit.

Leader-Centred Church

A third kind of church is "leader-centred". Now every church needs leadership and the Bible has loads to say about it. I went to a church once where the leader was away and the second in command was at the helm. At the helm he was – he didn't do a lot in the service, he didn't even preach, but his presence was monumental. The leadership of that church was dynamic, charismatic, demanding, impressive, but talking with members I found that nothing happened except through the bottleneck of the leadership. A leader-centred church can stifle persons.

Programme-Centred Church

A fourth kind of church might be called a “programme-centred” church. My parents in law have been Christians for decades. A few years ago they went to a new church where the first thing everyone had to do was a Christian basics course. It was a “programme-centred” church. It was very useful for the leaders; administratively they always knew that everyone was at a certain level. After doing the basics course you could join a home group – and all the home groups followed the same, controlled syllabus.

Now, we use programmes here. All churches have programmes – to the extent that if the Holy Spirit left us you'd barely notice the difference in some places because the same curricula would simply roll on. The New Testament church had programmes and projects; one of the reasons Alpha is so successful is that it follows a simple formula – a programme that can be replicated. But programmes are there to serve people rather than the other way round.

Person-Centred Church

These are some alternative models of church which we see all around us. They're not necessarily bad and they may well be God-centred. But the church I envision is a person-centred church. What does it mean to be a person-centred church? Obviously I'm going to unpack a more extensive answer throughout this series, but for now, here are a few salient points:

Celebrating Uniqueness

Firstly, it's a church where individual personhood is acknowledged, loved and celebrated. It's not about the cult of individualism or constantly focusing “me, me, me” but this person-centred church delights in diversity and the expression of each person's unique, precious, contribution. Yesterday Ruth and I spent 7 hours in a salsa class. I'd love to play bass in a salsa band – they just repeat the same figure over and over, but it provides the bedrock for the brass, or ad-libbing vocal to shine out. So the person-centred church is a great celebration of individuality and uniqueness.

Cherishing Relationship

But that doesn't mean the cult of the individual, because the second characteristic is relatedness. I am valued in this church, but that means I also learn to value you. Or because you are valued, I learn to value myself – the emphasis is on valuing everyone: We make room for the personhood of others, and develop wonderful relationships. I remember a clergyman in Lewisham setting out his stall as to why we should vote him on to Diocesan Synod. He said, “some people's idea of church is like this:” and he mimed a formal ballroom dance. “My way is more like this:” and he mimed a slow canoodling dance at the end of a party. The person-centred church is all about relationships.

Person-to-Person with God

Thirdly, in the person-centred church we meet God person to person, and find the Spirit speaks to our core. Often in a programme or doctrine-centred church we want people to come to Christ in prescribed ways. It's much neater for the leaders and easier to document if everyone says a particular prayer to come into God's kingdom. But the Person-Centred Church allows for a much deeper encounter: person-to-person between us and God. As Robert Farrar Capon says, "The point is not whether any of these interpretations is true, or even adequate (some are more so, some are less); it is that none of them are strictly necessary for laying hold of the atonement Jesus offers. All you need for that is to believe in *him* – to say "Yes, Jesus I trust you" as opposed to "No, Jesus, get lost." (Kingdom, Grace, Judgement, p. 151) In a person-centred church God speaks in ways unprescribed by human wisdom and our lives are transformed therefore from the inside out and the Spirit speaks person to person.

Connected Outreach

Fourthly, the person-centred church reaches out through personal connection – through people's faith becoming known in their family, friends or acquaintances. Yes, we have programmes and events through which we celebrate our life and these provide great opportunities to invite new people in, but the essential thing is the relationships themselves. And people stay in a person-centred church because of the new relationships they make – and sometimes they leave because the relationships fade or falter – and that can be a weakness of the person-centred church.

A Place of Reality

So finally, the person-centred church is a place of reality – where the truth of my messy world isn't covered over by slickness of the service, the tidyness of the teaching, the wow-factor of the worship, but the two realities of life experienced in this world and gospel revelation in the Bible are worked out together within the community of faith – a community with a dynamic, relating God-in-three-persons at its centre. Reality matters tremendously to me. A person-centred church, with its challenges and celebrations - ensures that we are always living both in the reality of this world and the reality of faith, both in the now and the not yet, bringing them together in one world and one Kingdom of God.

Amen