

## May 2022: Belonging to God

In April I celebrated Easter, a Christian festival so well known that virtually everyone, whatever their faith or none, knows it has something to do with Christians. On May 26 I will celebrate Ascension Day, a Christian festival so obscure that most non-churchgoers have never even heard of it and often only a few churchgoers come along to the Ascension Day services, which are always on a Thursday. (Always on the 40<sup>th</sup> day from Easter Sunday, in case you are wondering.)

As I reflect on the days that are important in my calendar, I find myself reflecting on the occasions that we remember, and how we mark them. After two years of lockdowns and various restrictions, one of my delights in recent months has been people coming forward to ask about weddings and baptisms in church. I always ask people why they want to mark these important occasions by coming to church, and I always love listening to the answers. Many people say things like, 'It's tradition,' or 'it just seems the right thing to do.' When we explore together what that means for them, there is often something there about faith; not necessarily a church-going faith, but a belief in God as something beyond ourselves, beyond humanity, beyond what we can see and touch, and a sense that to make promises and commitments before God is a significant and important thing to do.

I believe that historically the Church of England has not been very good at recognising or understanding the faith of people who do not go to church. Some researchers have suggested that people see themselves as 'belonging to God,' in several different ways: through 'activity,' that is through regular church-going; through 'events,' that is through marking significant events and dates, such as weddings, Christmas, and so on; through 'place,' that is through sensing God in special places, maybe the church building or the churchyard, maybe particular places in the natural world; or through 'people,' that is through being part of a wider 'church' community, supporting things like coffee mornings or fetes that the church may put on. Of course, our traditional church services really only tend to support the faith of those who fall into the first group, those who belong through 'activity.'

If you know that you have faith, but you do not find church services particularly helpful or meaningful, I'd love to hear from you about how 'church' could be better at helping you celebrate your faith, or better at supporting you. And my prayer for us all is that we would always resist the temptation to want others to be like us, and would grow better each day at cherishing the differences we find.

Yours in Christ,  
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