

CROWN COURT SERMON  
11<sup>th</sup> OCTOBER 2002  
preached by Rev Robert Cotton

This is a brilliant book which I strongly recommend you don't read. You don't need to read it because it's full 550 pages long. It is packed with figures, statistics and numbers. At times it is very hard going, but within these pages there is a fantastic idea. As soon as I heard from the High Sheriff that one of her themes for this year was the support of volunteers, I thought this is the book I must preach on. It is called *Bowling Alone*.

The scene described in the book is very simple. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most American adults belonged to a 10-pin Bowling Club — or they belonged to the PTA, or the local Gardening Society or were active in local politics. For much of this century, the American population has been essentially a society of joiners. They did these things together. So on an evening they would turn up at the Bowling Club to spend time with some people they knew and some people they didn't know, to be in a place where they could share joys and sorrows. Maybe they would end up doing someone a favour, or perhaps someone would offer a favour to them.

But from about 1960 onwards the numbers of joiners has plummeted so that now we bowl alone. Of course, the American population is still bowling, but they are not bowling in Bowling Clubs. They are still gardening, but they garden alone. Local politics is no longer a place where you work with others; it has become a place of single-issue combats, so that people try and get merely what they personally want. People may still attend the PTA, but they won't find anyone to organise the Barn Dance. There is a severe volunteer shortage.

This is all describing American society, but my guess is that much of what I have described so far is recognisable and familiar to us here in England. The saying in the book that really crystallised this for me was this: "if you don't go to your neighbour's funeral, he won't come to yours". I love that: "if you don't go to your neighbour's funeral, he won't come to yours"! Now one of the challenges of preaching at the Crown Court service is that there is a two-tier congregation: the younger generation there up in the gallery is floating literally 20 yards behind and 20 foot above you. So let me translate that saying into words that are suitable for them: "if you don't go to your neighbour's birthday party, he won't come to yours". Of course you'll go to your friend's birthday party, and of course you will go to a birthday party if you are promised a very exciting time and a present at the end. But what happens when there is not much in it. If you don't go to your neighbour's birthday party, then he won't come to yours. But I, for one, want to live in a community where if I do someone a favour then maybe I can trust that someone else will do one for me, probably, sometime. It is a worrying situation because as volunteer numbers plummet, all sorts of measurements of community happiness decrease dramatically as well: educational achievement, safety, even economic prosperity.

Now the reasons for community life diminishing are manifold and you need to read the book to see all sorts of ways that this is happening. The three most obvious are these:

first, work pressure - everyone saying 'I am too busy to help, too much trouble at work'. The second is distance. Cheap car transport detaches us from our neighbour, so the birthday party for those of us who are living in GU1 is always over there in GU2!. This means we don't naturally rub up against our neighbours. So ironically one of the advantages of the blocked streets in Guildford nowadays would be that we simply can't get in our cars and we have to know who our neighbours are. Thirdly (and I have to be careful here, for I still want to speak as a priest and not sound too much like a nagging father) - but thirdly and most significantly, we are watching too much television, or playing too many computer games. Those sorts of things are lonely activities and they make us live, if not bowl, alone.

But rather than explore more the depressing things that make us live our lives alone, I want to ask: what can we do about this? What opportunities do we have to turn around the situation? I have three suggestions. One suggestion is unacceptable, one is private, and one - well, I'm not so sure.

The first one: there is a very clear answer to what we must do if we want to build vibrant community life where we care and share much with our neighbours, and that is 'we need to go to war'. The evidence and the statistics are overwhelmingly clear. Go to war: and during that period and for a generation afterwards we will have vibrant community life. Find a common enemy, whether it is race or religion, and that will draw us close together! But this solution is clearly unacceptable. The same is true of school life as well. Within the playground at Holy Trinity School there will be all sorts of rivalries and gangs and little niggles between various groups. Yet all these will be laid aside and the school lives as one body as soon as you get out onto the playing fields to play Queen Eleanor's School at football. Go to war with someone else and community life naturally flourishes!

But I do not think that is an acceptable solution, so here is my second suggestion. This, I have to admit, is very private. I mean that it is a suggestion that I cannot and do not want to force on you. As I read the Bible and hear the many varied stories within it, there is one pattern of story that I hear time and time again. Let me say this also to the school children: you've heard me give assemblies for three years now. I vary it each week, but as I tell many different stories within assemblies, I would like to think that you could start to recognise one pattern within all these stories, and that is this: that God makes the first move; that God gives before ever expecting a response. You may expect preachers to encourage you to be loving; you may expect preachers to expect or demand kindness or generosity from you. But before I ever get to that, I need you to hear this: that God makes the first move; that God gives, before ever expecting a response. This is the pattern that I hope moulds me and my life. Before I ever get up in the morning, the sun has already arisen and there is beauty, light and joy in the world. Before I grow up to be an adult and make my own contribution to this world, I have already been loved by parents, family and others. Before, before, before..... God's generous love is already there. That is the pattern that makes sense to me. So it leads me to the question: as I am already a receiver, what can I do in response?

Now, that describes me and my life. Although the national government is increasingly turning to faith communities to see what they can do to improve the health of our national society, we cannot bear this burden alone. So I say to you, what stories can you tell?

What moulds your life so that together we can live in a world where it makes sense to be trusting, generous, and publicly virtuous?

My third suggestion: I am not so sure about this. But I do have a strong sense that we need to honour what is good. And we need to do this more often. When I spoke to the High Sheriff she told me about her theme of supporting volunteers. Then she happened to mention that during the week before she had been to Kings College here in Guildford to open a new wing of their building. She said 'it is such a fine place'. And I immediately said 'let us honour that'. She went on to describe that she had just been to visit the St John Ambulance service. So I said 'let's involve them in the service too'. So in a moment, Mrs Jill Twamley, one volunteer from that organisation, is going to take part in this service. I hadn't met Mrs Twamley till earlier this morning (she's not a personal friend), but I have learnt that she has been serving as a volunteer for years. This is our chance to honour that, and through honouring her to honour the countless thousands of others who through their voluntary activity contribute to the health of our nation. I have this hunch that if we can find more ways to honour those who are good, somehow it will rebound to our mutual benefit.

I don't want to bowl alone. I would like someone to come to my funeral so I'll play my part now. All this because the pattern of life that God calls us to is founded on generous, active, sacrificial love.

Amen.