

An unlikely gathering

Readings: 1 Peter 2:4 - 10, Luke 4:16 - 21

Martin and Pippa Harrison have been on Sabbatical. At one point they were on a plane heading to Israel. The man next to Martin asked him about what he was going to do in Israel. Martin asked him the same questions. The man was on a pilgrimage with a party of Greek Orthodox Christians, including the Archbishop, from the States.

He was a Protestant, previously a Pentecostal who had wandered from that church. He had questions about a Christianity which was just him, God and the Bible. After his wandering he came back to God and found the Orthodox Church. Here he found community, church order, history, orthodoxy; none which he had found in his Pentecostal roots. Now he felt he had the complete package. "It was like coming home," he said.

It was like coming home.....

Today we begin a series on the church. It's an exciting series; one that a few of us have planned together. We'll look at various elements of our worship services and ask why we do those things. We'll also discuss some of the hard things about church; about the questions we have and how we often don't meet our own aspirations. It's going to be fun – it's going to be informative and will lead us on in our journey towards being the people the Lord wants us to be.

Today is our first in the series, although Micah kind of began with his Pentecost sermon. I'm going to consider why we do church at all, what our foundation is and what a church community might look like if it truly was "like coming home".

So why do we do church? Weekly services are only part of church life but they are the easiest to identify?

Why do we gather together as a church? Answers might include:

- To meet with God – though we can do that anywhere
- Friendship – it is a sad state of affairs if the only people we relate with are Christians though
- To sing – well some people hate singing
- To hear the sermon – sometimes they seem totally irrelevant
- For communion – confession time: this is where I most often meet the Lord in a profound way. it's what drew me to the Anglican church. However for some, it is a crazy minimisation of real fellowship over a proper meal.

Lots of Christians aren't part of church today. Probably Micah will talk more about this later on. Does it matter? Many would say 'nah'. Recently I've heard some very well respected leaders say they wouldn't go if they didn't work for the church.

And the Bible doesn't really push the issue. So it's okay then right?

Hmmm... the reason the Bible doesn't address the issue is because the question never arose. In a communal society without Christian television or the internet, there's no way you'd sit

in your own space getting what you need. In that society everything was about what the group needed. Meeting together was an essential part of that. Simon Jones writes in his book; 'Why bother with church?' that "Our culture idolises individual choice and freedom. The New Testament does not."¹

The New Testament paints the church in various ways, always as groups of Jesus followers, always with Jesus at the centre. Christ is the head of the church family, Ephesians 5:12 tells us. He is the Saviour of his body, the church. We don't exist without him.

1. Living Stones

Peter describes the church as a group of living stones, founded on Christ. Together we form a building that brings praise and honour to Jesus.

2. Holy Priests

The same passage says we are all holy priests, chosen to serve the Lord and make him known to others. That is a priest's role. A priest worships God bringing others along in the process.

3. Bride of Christ

Paul describes the church as the bride of Christ. He wants that church to be holy even as he worries about the pull of the world. There's a beautiful picture in Revelations of people from all cultures worshipping Jesus and wearing white robes as a sign of purity. Rev 7:9 – 17

4. Family

Perhaps the loveliest description is that of family. Jesus told us to call God Father and even 'Daddy'. He promises family relationships especially to those who don't have natural families. Mark 10:28 – 30

We are brothers and sisters in Christ. At the end of the disciple's letters are lists of greetings to loved Christian family members. Even staunch Paul has great tenderness towards his church family. He calls many of them 'my beloved' so and so. Romans 6:5 – 12 In one place he says "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord and greet his mother, a mother to me also. V13

Can you recall Christian people who have acted as mothers and fathers to you? What difference have they made in your lives?

Like normal families the church is fraught with tension and trouble with each other; if we are honest with each other that is. In New Testament times a family was nothing like most of ours. It consisted of several generations living together under one roof. A family like that has lots of advantages and there will always be some conflicts that need work.

5. Body

The church is often called the body of Christ too:

Ephesians 2:16 refers to previous divisions of Jews and everyone else being broken down:

¹ Why bother with church? Simon Jones IVP, 116

Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross,

Romans 12:5

We are many parts of one body and we all belong to each other.

1 Corinthians 12:12 – 27

V21 – 22 The eye can never say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” The head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you.” In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary.

So there are wonderful descriptions of what the church can be; what we are called to be. Which one speaks most to you?

- ⊕ Living stones
- ⊕ Holy priests
- ⊕ Jesus’ bride
- ⊕ Family
- ⊕ A body
- ⊕ Or perhaps another description I haven’t included here.

Coming Home

No picture is of only one part, one person. Each picture was addressed to the New Testament Church and applies to us also. Each picture offers its own challenges that involve other members. We can’t be a church of one.

I am learning that listening to people I disagree with, people who rub me up the wrong way, people who are wrong when I am always right (ha ha). A vital part of God’s plan for our growth is each other. If we want to grow as human beings and as Christian, we need each other. Simon Jones says that ‘Church helps us to keep our eccentricities in check.’²

How is church working for you?

Many people are looking for genuine community. They want a place to feel secure, where they can bounce around ideas and not get jumped on, where they can be accepted just as they are without someone telling them they don’t measure up.

I’m not sure if I’ve told you this before. I’m not one for saying “God said” very often because often I get it wrong. But when we were thinking and praying about a mission statement, in the middle of the night I woke up, and the phrase ‘Loving Jesus; building community’ was sitting there in my head. I didn’t hear a voice or have a dream, it was just there, and it wasn’t there before I slept.

I felt like it had come from God. I discussed it with Vestry, staff members and others. The blokes felt that ‘Loving Jesus’ was too girly and too weak. Me, being the humble person I am, heard what they were saying and felt I could go along with the alternative suggestion of ‘Following Jesus; building community’.

That is now our mission statement. And maybe I haven’t pushed it enough. But I feel like it is growingly who we are as a church. Being community will become even more important as time goes on.

² Ibid 157

People have walked into our church and walked out again. Some have not felt welcome. Some have stayed, in spite of that feeling; because they believed we are the people God would have them be church with. Others have felt welcome. My prayer is that there will be many more in this latter category as we grow into our mission statement.

Following Jesus means that it is not all about me. It's not about me as an individual. It's not even about us as an existing community. It's about revealing Jesus in our community life so that others can also be included and grow towards being the complete people he wants us all to be.

Here is what one person wrote about church:

"I feel I want to be part of a group trying to find God. I can't do it alone, and I feel strongly that in a world so full of crap, it is important to choose to walk towards good – no matter how flawed its earthly forms may be."³

That's what I think we are about, walking towards the good we see in God, together.

God's goodness is revealed in Jesus' mission statement:

bringing Good News to the poor,
proclaiming release to captives
enabling the blind to see,
the oppressed to be free,
and that the time of the Lord's favour is here

in Christ
through us

We will stuff up lots of times; I certainly will. But we are living stones, holy priests, Jesus' bride. We're a family and each one of us is a vital member of the body of Christ in this wider community of Richmond, Hope, Waimea, Stoke ... wherever you live.

Our series exploring church goes over 7 weeks. Most of you won't be able to make every Sunday but I encourage you to read or listen to the sermon on our website if you can't. I encourage you to prayerfully consider the reflection questions each week. And I encourage you to respond with your thoughts and feelings in your various groups, or to me or another church leader, perhaps in person, via email or the phone or even the suggestion box.

Let's make this a conversation rather than a monologue from the front. We're an odd bunch but God has a plan for us.

Reflection questions:

What makes me come to worship at church? What makes me stay away?

When do I most feel part of the church community? What things make me feel disconnected?

How do I contribute to our church community; it's worship, fellowship and/or outreach?

How would I contribute if I had the chance?

Do I see God at the centre of our church life?

³ Spirited Exchanges newsletter (now defunct) Issue 15