

**The Church as the people of God**

I wonder what you think or feel about church? Take a moment to think about it and share with the person you are sitting next to, tell them what you like and don't like about church. I give you 2 minutes.

I will tell you here and now that I often struggle with church. Rosemary tells me I always have, ever since she has known me. Many times I have nearly walked, for different reasons. I can think of other things to do on a Sunday! I am guessing that many of us have felt like that at one time or another. Indeed, most of us will recognize the empty seats where some of our friends used to sit and do so no longer. We feel sad at that, and diminished by their absence. But something keeps the rest of us coming week by week be it duty, habit, conscience, sense of community, the desire for worship, to receive the bread and wine, or perhaps, more remarkably, to hear a sermon. It is therefore timely that we have just embarked on a series about church, to explore what it means. Ali kicked off last week with that powerful message that we are stronger together. Today I want us to consider *theologically* what the church is. Now, I am no theologian but I found preparing for this inspiring. It raised my eyes to something higher and greater. May that happen for all of us here today.

The French Catholic theologian Alfred Loisy said: '*Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and it was the church that he got!*' The poor man was excommunicated in 1908 although it's not clear to me whether it was for that statement. The problem, fundamentally, is that the visible institution of the church just doesn't match up to what we expect of the Kingdom of God. We can, I hope, see flashes of the Kingdom of God in the church; but we might see them outside the church as well. It's like they *overlap*. We can see plenty of not-so-good stuff in churches too. That should not surprise as. Churches have fallible people in them: in other words, people like you and me. What are we to make of this? The first thing to say is that Jesus entrusted his message and his mission to ordinary, imperfect men and women. He did not, and does not, instantly transform us into perfectly loving, peaceful, godly, wise people. That is evident! The transformation that takes place within us is slow, from within out: think of the parable of the yeast in the dough (Mt 13:33). Or the seed in the parable of the sower: 75% of it ultimately went to waste, and that which did produce fruit took a whole season to grow (Lk 8:1-15). This way of doing things is risky, it can go wrong and takes a long time. The church is not so much a museum of saints, as a hospital for sinners.

Jesus had almost nothing to say about the church. The word for church, *ekklesia* (which means, 'called out'), is used only twice in the gospels, both times in Matthew. But of course Jesus wasn't a Christian and didn't go to church as we know it, although he did attend the synagogue and the Temple in Jerusalem. The church as a distinct entity took off after the coming of the Spirit as the followers of the Way of Jesus began meeting together to break bread and share the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42). Unlike the Jewish community, it included Gentiles and did not require circumcision. It was broad, eclectic and for three centuries endured persecution until Constantine made it an official religion of the Roman Empire.

Although Jesus had practically nothing to say about the church, his followers did, and the principal authors of the NT – Luke the author of Acts, Paul, John, Peter, and James had plenty to say. The detail is a bit sketchy but it was the church that happened.

Here is my key theme for today: *The church as the people of God*. Not just a rag-tag bunch of women and men but the *people of God*. Let that truth soak in. Where does that idea come from? Well, Paul clearly saw the church as *in continuity* with the ancient people of God in Israel. So in Romans 4 Paul tells us that Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, is our father too (Rom 4:16). And in Galatians: '*He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus*' (Gal 3:14). If you like, Paul saw the church as the *new Israel*. This is no small claim. But the key passage, to my mind, on this matter is in 1 Peter. Peter grasps the full force of this in these wonderful verses, writing to the Jewish and Gentile churches scattered across eastern Europe: '*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*' (1 Pet 2:9,10).

This truth, that we are God's people, is not immediately obvious. It is something which is *discerned*. Do you get the difference? There is a parallel with the person of Jesus here. Jesus was a man. A human being. Slowly, those who knew him, heard and saw him, came to realize that he was actually more than that. That in encountering Jesus they were encountering God himself. And yet that was not immediately obvious. Isn't that rather surprising? That God could be so *concealed* that it was possible actually to miss him entirely? And yet this is the way of God with humanity: not to blast us with his presence but to be almost unnoticed, to slip in through the back door. So it is in the church. The presence of God among us, the reality of the church – of us - as the people of God is obscured, shaded; and yet *there*. It may be discerned.

There are a few more thoughts I would like to leave you with but hang on above all to the reality of the church as the people of God. That is really important. Firstly, what *makes* a church? How does it come about? The Reformers, both Luther and Calvin, had a clear idea of this and it chimes in well with the NT pattern. The church is called into being where the word of God is preached, and where the sacraments are rightly administered. Think again of the parable of the sower. The seed that was, in Jesus' own words, the word of God. It falls to the ground and there is a *reaction*. Something happens – except when the birds of the air come and eat it all up. But for the rest, the word of God grows. It may be choked, it may have no root and wither away, or in good soil it will grow up and bear fruit. For all of us here, this will have happened, to a greater or lesser extent. We are drawn by *something* in what we hear, see or experience of God expressed in the gospel. It will be different for all of us. I'm not sure whether it was design or coincidence, but a verse in the OT reading of today puts this in a nutshell: *'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.'* (Is 55:8,9). See how this brings together God and humanity with the word in between, calling out a response and creating a community of people in tune with what God is saying. In fact this parallels the creation story in the first few verses of Genesis where God speaks creation into being. The gospel reading in John 5 brings that to a point. Jesus said, *'You diligently search the scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me'* (Jn 5:39). The scriptures, the written word of God, leads us to *Jesus*.

Along with the word go the two sacraments: baptism and holy communion. Baptism, the sign of entry into the new community, symbol of death to one way of life and rising to a new one, encapsulating the whole story of the passion of Jesus in a water splash. Communion, the thanksgiving, the Lord's Supper, the sign of the presence of Christ among us and between us. Do you see how these fit together? Again, none of these things, these signs are knockouts, not blasts to make us believe. Look the wrong way, fill your head with worries and you will miss them. It is a delicate thing for the word to call out the church, for the sacraments to reveal the presence of Christ. You need to look carefully, to *discern*. This is why, at root, Sunday worship is the way it is. Our Anglican liturgy is soaked in scripture, the word of God; we have readings, sermons, the Eucharist, baptism. They are not there by accident.

Ali quoted Barth and I will too. Barth had an interesting way of viewing the church. He saw it not so much as an institution, but as an *event*. Think about that. So the church only 'happens', only comes into being when the word or sacraments take place. Church is happening now! We are all experiencing the word of God – I hope positively! – and are leading up to the consecration of the bread and wine when, so quietly, we say Christ is present here and we receive him under cover of the elements. In other words, *something is happening now to make us church*. God the Father has sent the Son, Jesus, who proclaimed a new way of life through his life, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. The word, the Scriptures, the message of God all point to Jesus and it is the response to that which makes us Church. The subtle reaction that takes between us and in us is mediated, of course, by the Spirit. It was He that propelled and energised the church on the day of Pentecost and it is His presence that we sense, to a greater or lesser extent. The church is a product, amazingly, of the Trinitarian God.

I heard Dave Tomlinson the other day, flogging his new book, *'How to be a bad Christian – and a better human being'*. If you haven't read it, do so – it's a great book. One of Dave's strong beliefs is that he meets people – many people – who, as he puts it, follow Jesus without knowing it. Good, kind people, unsung heroes. It was a relief to me to hear him say that because it makes sense. But these are not church members – so why do church? The answer has to be because in church, during the event, the unknown becomes known. Because church is the place where the person of Jesus is celebrated, spoken of and enacted. And that can only be to the good. Another interesting thing he said is his suggestion that we regard the word Christian as a verb, a process. It's not as if as a Christian any of us have arrived – we are in the process of transformation. So think of church as an event – where word and sacrament bring about the presence of Christ and create the miracle of the people of God; and of us being slowly transformed, 'christianed', to reflect more and more the kingdom of God, the hidden reality of which the church is the visible sign.

*'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.'* (1 Pet 2:9,10).

#### Questions for discussion:

- Think about what you like and don't like about church. What keeps you coming?
- *'Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom and he got the church!'* – could it have been any other way?
- 'The church as the people of God' – 1Peter 2:9,10. Read those verses and reflect on them, talk about them.
- What do you think about the idea that church is 'called out', created by the word and sacraments?
- How does Barth's idea of church as an 'event' work out for you? Does it make any sense?
- How has all of this altered, if at all, your view of church?