

THE NEW HUMANITY

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

Occasion: Sunday Service, OBC

Date: 10th February, 2019

When you get the privilege to visit different churches and placements in times of study like these, you tend to reflect lots on the church, on who we are and what we are to be. Who and what exactly is ‘the church’? There are many answers to this question one could give.

In the world, the church is seen as quite a strange group of people who probably resemble something like a weird, religious club, singing old songs and stuck in tradition. Government, media, and society at large struggle to define exactly what we are, although it usually holds negative connotations. In general—and this is an attitude that exists whether in or out the church—church is seen as a ‘place’ you ‘go.’ The way we tend to use the word ‘church’ would indicate that it is indeed a place, an auditorium in fact, located on 241 Otumoetai Road, Tauranga.

For many, it’s a place where you’d need to be on your best behaviour, where you must put on your best manners, best outfit, and be quiet. For some the church is primarily a social thing, a place to see friends and keep up with community news. For others it’s the place you receive your weekly religious experience, to feel God’s presence and be ‘filled up’ before you enter the long slog of the spiritually dry week to come. For some, the church is the people who were there for them in times of illness, grief, or tragedy. For others it’s the place where their lives were transformed and totally turned around, once lost but now found. No doubt many of you have your own stories and definitions to add here.

What does the Bible say about the church? Well, many things in fact, and some things we don’t often spend a huge amount of time reflecting on. This morning we are going to examine one such passages about the church found in Ephesians together and intertwine it with a reflection of my time here. This letter was written by an early church leader Paul probably addressing a number of different church communities in the area of ancient Ephesus. We read from Ephesians 2:11:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:11-22 NIV.)

What exactly does Paul in this passage define the church as? He says something quite radical, something not necessarily in contradiction with some of the other definitions we gave before, but still something quite different from all those things. Paul here in the letter to the Ephesians makes the bold claim that the church is in fact an entirely new humanity, a totally remade and totally different group of people who have been brought together by the power of Christ and the cross. Instead of being a place to go or club to be involved in, Paul tells us that we are instead a new humanity united under the New Human,

Jesus Christ, a gathering of people by sheer miracle. Though once this group was not even a possibility, through the sending the Son and the life of Jesus, *all* are to be part of God's people. Let's pray.

I. THE NEW COVENANT (vv. 11-13)

Let's work our way through the text. First Paul talks about these two groups of people: the circumcised and the uncircumcised—very strange and bizarre categories to place people in to us modern listeners. However, and any of your familiar with your Old Testament will know, this distinction Paul makes is tied to one clear thing: the old covenant of YHWH made to the people of Israel. To understand what is going on here and to understand from whom the church descends, we are going to have to do some background work into this nation of Israel.

Revelation begins to a humble people group of the ancient Near East, at God's revelation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God makes promises to these people, promising to grow them in size and holiness to be his own; redeeming them at the Exodus away from slavery and giving them the Law to help them live at Sinai. YHWH promises to remain faithful to them, to enter a loving and faithful relationship with them. This was the covenant, and circumcision was the symbol and image of this agreement.

At Sinai, God clarifies the purpose of this gathered, covenant community, Israel: "if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:5-6a). Israel as God's people were to be his treasured possession and display to the world, a shining light and example to what humankind is like when rightly ordered under the Creator God, and a blessing for 'all peoples of the earth' (Gen 12:1-3). Israel is now God's masterpiece; his show and tell, his pride and joy; a chosen people with whom he covenants with.

However, as time passed, the Old Testament records how Israel began to fail as God's light and special nation, how their 'privilege' got twisted to 'favouritism,' and slowly the nations they were supposed to be an example to become the people they looked down upon and despised. A great divide arose by the between the unholy and unclean Gentile (non-Jewish) and the people of Israel. It is sometimes hard for us to imagine how intense and strong this divide was, though one scholar gives us a glimpse:

The [ancient] Jew had immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be the fuel for the fires of hell ... If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out.¹

This was the level of venom which had developed between the two groups by the time of Jesus. Just as a veil between God and humanity had been created by sin and death in the beginning, within God's creation a creaturely divide had arisen between brothers and sisters made together in the image of God. The racial tension was immense.

We must understand then the incredible significance of Paul's claim here, that through the Messiah, the Christ, God flips this divide on its head in the most remarkable way. Not only does the cross do the miraculous work to tear the veil between God and humanity—the story with which we may be most familiar—it also renders the division between all humanity nil.

This Jewish Apostle Paul, a man who by his own admission once hated Gentile's and persecuted Christians who associated with them makes the claim that by the death and resurrection of Christ, the once inexhaustible chasm between Jew and Gentile had been filled like a great ball pit. An enormous

¹ William Barclay, quoted in: John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: God's New Society*, BST (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 91.

canyon carved by the ancient river of human division and sin was dramatically filled in at the cross, this grand obstacle made nothing by the sacrifice of the Son.

Therefore, while once only Israel was God's salvation community, now by Jesus all are welcome into his family. While there is no way any man or woman is worthy to be God's child, through the one and only Son we are adopted, grafted into our true family. Those who were once distant have been brought near just as the God who was once far has come close, "moved into the neighbourhood" (John 1:14, MSG). This is what Paul is on about.

II. THE NEW HUMANITY (vv. 14-18)

So by the sacrifice of Jesus, not only is humanity brought into right relationship with God but people are brought into right relationship with each other. We often stress the fact that we are saved from sin to be with God but not always saved by God for right relationship and community with the other.

Because Christ's work does not stop at simply opening up membership to Israel to a wider audience, but actually does something entirely new; we read in vv. 14-15 about this union, the bringing of two into one like the miracle of marriage, richer and brighter than before, more colourful and multi-variegated: a new humanity. Where before there was division there is now unity, the great reconciling work of Christ not only transforming the individual soul with God but also the all human relations, rendering not just new individuals but an entirely new *society*, the new humanity ordered under Christ.

This is a new place of racial, cultural, social, gendered diversity. The groups who can't get along out there in the world, the groups the media love to sensationalise and politicians wage their wars upon; the lines of black and white, immigrant or indigenous, male and female, are melted away by the sacrifice of Jesus, washed by the slow agony of the cross and now bound together by the Spirit of God. Here is a place where things are upside down, where people from different classes, ages, and backgrounds gather to worship God together. This is a place of their unity. Unity is not the same thing as uniformity, where 'you become like me,' instead it is a diverse group from all different nations. This unified group of radiant people are to be the shining light, the trailer to the movie, still called to be "a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9).

Let's begin to return to our initial question. What is the church? Who are we?

The church is the new Israel, inheritor of the old covenants made to the Jewish people. Yet while no Gentile or non-Jew was able to share in this salvation life and community of God now by the Son all are welcomed in to this *new* humanity, a new society ordered under the Risen King Jesus.

Since my time here I've been able to meet and spend some time with many of you. I've been lucky enough to sit down with ex-lawyers and doctors, florists and caretakers, teachers and parents, explorers and settlers, scientists and musicians. The church is to be the most eclectic mix of people in the world. We are to represent the full diversity of humanity to the earth. In this increasingly multi-ethnic and culturally diverse, globalising world, we need to begin to ask the questions: who is missing in our discussions? Who is missing in our leadership, on our elders, in our gatherings? Who has the microphone most of the time and who doesn't?

II. GOD'S DWELLING PLACE (vv. 19-22)

Paul's claim then grows in its staggering boldness; this new marriage, this new covenant set by Christ not only gathers and creates an entirely new people but then that new people become God's household,

his holy temple in fact, “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).

The God of the old covenant whose mighty presence could only pass by Moses, the Holy One whom Isaiah shrivels to be in front of, the Sovereign Lord whose holy presence so deadly it requires an entire priesthood and temple system now makes his house among us: ordinary, broken, terrible sinners. Though we are nothing in light of this Holy God, though we struggle and strain to keep our promises, love our enemy, and act justly and kindly, the faithful, loving, kind, and just Lord of all creation dwells within us, building his church to be the place he lives by the Spirit.

It’s perhaps hard to be blown away as much by these cosmic claims until we bring them into our ordinary reality. What the inspired apostle is saying, is that the same group of people who gather every Sunday in rundown buildings across the world, who sing questionably-in-tune songs; the same group of people who argue at partnership meetings about the colour of the carpet; the same group of people who struggle to acquire finances for fancy equipment or worldly glitz and glam; the same group of people who sometimes hurt and attack each other, burning deep scars in their tracks and split churches are actually by the Spirit and through the Son the new temple of the Eternal God, the who is and was and is to come, the Alpha and the Omega, Beginning and End, and now are his light to the world, the trailer to the film; if you want to see what the movie’s like watch the trailer.

It’s not by our own righteousness or goodness that this is possible, but it is through the truly rightness Son. Through him, God has chosen his community, his church, to be this new humanity and temple of light and love.

APPLICATION

Where have we missed this astonishing fact about who we are and are to be? Listen to the words of the great evangelical leader John Stott writing in the late 1970s, as poignant as ever.

One of our chief evangelical blind spots has been to overlook the central importance of the church. We tend to proclaim individual salvation without moving on to the saved community. We emphasize that Christ died for us “to redeem us from all iniquity” rather than “to purify for himself a people of his own.” We think of ourselves more as “Christians” than as “church[people],” and our message is more good news of a new life than of a new society.²

I concur. Another Australian theologian satirically writes about the evangelical attitude, *“Why bother wasting time with committees when there are souls to save? Why bother painting cathedrals when you can preach to the folks at Walmart?”*³ Why indeed? Why bother with a community that can be frustrating, hurtful, and tiring; a place that can seem so ordinary, so unremarkable when put through a certain lens? In response to this, some try to make the church ‘relevant,’ employing all the latest tools to ensure the perfect, hip place. Yet, all we need to do is simply return to our ancient and precious identify we already have; that that by the earth-shattering event of the cross this group of people gathered here, you and I, are made and meant to be the temple of the Creator God, not by any of our own merit but by his, redeemed and saved away from death *for* community, worship, and witness together. Together we are sent out, priests to mediate among the nations, light to shine in the dark places, a temple to display the glory of God that all may know him and enter his new humanity.

Our late-modern world is obsessed with what it calls ‘freedom’: freedom of choice, freedom to associate with whom you want, freedom to believe in what you will. This incredibly individualistic way to live results in this familiar western worldview you’ll know well: true contentment and happiness lies in

² John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 9.

³ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 701.

being authentic to yourself, to following your own desires in careers, housing ladders, sex, and material things. If you don't like your job, quit and instead follow your passion; if you don't like your wife, leave her and have an affair; if you don't like your church, leave it and go to the other community down the road until you realise that place too is imperfect.

Community and church is messy, it's hard and it's uncomfortable. And this command to be God's people together given all throughout the New Testament flies especially in the face of our individualistic and choice-anxious modern worldview. However, being together as God's diverse family requires sacrifice, it requires giving up your own comfort, loving those you disagree with and look different to you, sacrificing time, money, and energy to people or places that could bite you in the butt. It's dangerous, and it's easy to see why our culture wouldn't want to participate. It requires a giving up of individual 'freedom.' Yet if we are to be faithful to the command of Christ and to the Jesus who has called us and saved us to be together, it is absolutely imperative. Miraculously, here is God's new temple and holy dwelling place, a light of diversity and community which is to display his glory to the world.

There are a lot of stories about the church out there, stories of dysfunction and brokenness, nasty church splits and dramatic pastor fall-outs. This creates in some circles a deep cynicism. Yet my time here at OBC has been a wonderful counter-narrative to the pessimism so rife in our communities. You've had a long stretch without a senior pastor and yet not fallen apart; you've seen dramatic growth and change in the Tauranga region and yet so many of you remain committed to the fellowship you share here; many of you no doubt have faced incredible personal challenges and yet continued to get up and pray each day, faithfully trusting in God's sovereign goodness though it seems absent.

You have restored some of my learnt cynicism about the church. My brief time here has been met not with raging politics, family feuds, and stuck-in-their-ways attitudes, although I am sure you've all had a fair few of those over the years. Rather, I have been received by prayerful, welcoming, faithful brothers and sisters who have talked with me about scripture, invited me into their homes, and shared their stories with me. For these gracious acts I am so thankful. You have refreshed and encouraged this young pastor-in-training to really believe in once again the power and testimony of ordinary people gathering week-by-week in an ordinary building, praying to see their community come to know Christ.

Yet more than even this, I am thankful to God who has called and created you, gathered us here and saved us from sin, not simply for individual salvation but for bonding us in community and covenant together by the Son. For this group before me: you are no ordinary group of people. There is no finite consequence to your gathering. But rather you are very dwelling place of the Eternal God by the Spirit who is here. He makes his home among us, even when things do not seem this way. It is because of this we continue on and never give in as the world would have us, all the more as the Day approaches.

Amen.