

The church - ministry and leadership

1 Peter 2: 4-10 and Ephesians 4: 11-13

The Chief Rabbi pays a visit to the Vatican. He is shown around all the wonderful art treasures and archives and then invited into the Pope's private office for tea. He notices a gold phone on the desk and asks what it is. "Oh, that's my hotline to the Almighty", replies the Pope. "You can use it if you like." So, the Chief Rabbi dials and has a quick chat about pressing issues and then hangs up. "That will be 10,000 euros", says the Pope. Well, the Chief Rabbi was a bit put out by this, but says nothing and pays up.

A couple of years later the Pope makes a return visit to Jerusalem, prays at the Wailing Wall and ends up in the Chief Rabbi's office for tea. He notices the gold telephone on the Rabbi's desk and asks what it is. "Oh, it is my hotline to the Almighty", he replies. "You can use it if you like." So, the Pope dials and asks for a good joke for a speech he has to give and chuckles at God's offering. He hangs up and the Chief Rabbi says "that will be two shekels." "Two shekels, how come it's so cheap." "Well," says the Chief Rabbi, "it's a local call from here."

I don't usually use jokes in sermons and it's quite strange doing it on zoom as I don't know whether people are laughing or groaning!

Today we are continuing our series on the church and there is a point to that story. It actually relates to what Peter is saying in his letter to scattered new Christians across Asia Minor. Because that was how Jerusalem was seen in OT days. It would have been a local call to God from Jerusalem because that is where God lived. He dwelt among his people in the temple. If you wanted to meet him, if you wanted to be forgiven, if you wanted a specific prayer answered, that is where you would go. The temple was the earthly home of God, the place where he had promised his presence.

And the people of Israel were his special people.

Look for example at Exodus 19:5-6:

"Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the people on the earth... and you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation."

We could look at many more verses but perhaps that is enough to see what Peter is doing in the reading we heard this morning from his first letter. All the promises of God to Israel are now declared to be part of the new covenant he has made with us, who declare that Jesus is Lord. Peter says to Christians then, scattered, persecuted and in need of encouragement and he says to us today in

a largely post Christian society, you the Church are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own possession. And you are the place where I am now to be found.

Of course, we can meet God anywhere; in the garden, in the wilderness through our own individual prayer but the Church is where God has agreed to make himself available. The Church is where he has covenanted to be present. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them." The church is given the privilege and the promise of the presence of God.

And, whereas the first chapter of Peter's letter is all about us as individuals, the salvation Jesus has bought for each of us on the cross, our duty to live holy lives and lives of love for others, at the beginning of this passage in 2:4, Peter addresses his readers corporately. As you come to Christ, the 'you' here is plural; you are coming to Christ together. And the word 'come' in the Greek is the root from which we get the word prostrate, it is a worshipping word. As we come together as worshippers of Jesus, God's chosen one, who is precious to us, God presences himself very specially with us.

In our readings from 1 Peter and Ephesians we have two quite familiar pictures of the Church. In 1 Peter the picture is of a building with each of us as a living stone intimately related to the cornerstone, Jesus himself and being built together by God, the master builder, into a spiritual house. As living stones, we are to be built around each other, on top of each other, rubbing alongside each other, no doubt having the rough bits rubbed off as time goes on. And the picture is clearly of a house which keeps on changing, God keeps on making us, into something more beautiful and more useful for his purposes. In Ephesians, as elsewhere in Paul's letters the picture is of the body of Christ with each of us parts of that body which can only properly function if each of us fulfils our roles, our ministries.

Both these images, I suggest, give us no option to live disconnected Christian lives, just us and God. We are meant, as Leslie Newbiggin puts it, to be "a community of mutual responsibility". It is in the way we worship, and do life together, demonstrating relationships of faithfulness and responsibility toward one another, that people will see the presence of God. Newbiggin again: "When by the grace of God, the local church is this kind of community, it stands in the local neighbourhood and the nation not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change, (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its actions of justice and peace will be seen to be the overflow of its life in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already experienced."

And that leads us on to this great statement from Peter that, as we are being built into a spiritual house, we are to become “a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

So what does that mean?

We know a lot about the role of the priesthood in the OT. Only those of the family of Aaron could be priests and offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Only the High priest could go into the Holy of Holies, God’s very presence and then only once a year. But all that has changed because of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We are now all priests. We all have equal access to God; no longer is access restricted to a chosen few. And, therefore, we all have the privilege and responsibility of ministering to God and to ministering to one another. One description of the office of a priest is that they stand before God on behalf of people and stand before people on behalf of God. The Church is sent into the world as a holy and royal priesthood to continue the work of Jesus our great High Priest, in the power of the spirit, reconciling people to God. I wonder do we think of ourselves as priests, people who minister to God, minister within the church and minister out into the world. That is the truth that this passage unlocks for us.

When our new Rector comes to join us, they will I’m sure bring many gifts to share with us and they will be anointed to lead us, but they will be leading a church full of priests and therefore not a church of observers but of active participants. That is God’s model. And isn’t it great that so much of that is already happening in the ministries being exercised in St Mary’s. But we want to see even more don’t we? So, let’s ask ourselves what are we being called to?

Now it is clear from this passage and that in Ephesians that part of our role as priests is to build up the body of Christ.

Note in the Ephesians passage that God gives us gifts of people with particular ministries of leadership: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Some of those gifts may be expressed through ordained clergy or licensed lay ministers, but they may equally be in other church members who God calls and gifts. And we need those gifts to be released among us if we are not seeing them all in action. Perhaps we should especially pray for those with prophetic gifts to help us to hear what God may be saying to us very specifically today or for those with evangelistic giftings to help us to speak and act the gospel to our neighbours. The whole point of these ministries, we are told, is so that the whole church may be prepared for works of service, the whole body may be built up, “until we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ.”

These ministries are not given just so that we can feel good and enjoy life together, they are given so that the church is enabled to serve the world around and become a visible embodiment of God's kingdom. As Peter tells us in 2:9 we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own possession so "that you may declare the praises of Him that called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." Doing church or being church as God has designed it, should make a great, visible declaration of who God is.

If we ask ourselves, what does this look like, we might say, if the gospel is about forgiveness, we need to be a forgiving community, and a place where people from whatever background can feel accepted. If the gospel is about reconciliation, we need to be a united community, listening to other's points of view and seeking the best for one other. If the gospel is about the love of God, we need to be a loving community. If the gospel is about a God who took the very nature of a servant, we need to be a community where service is not found demeaning but fulfilling and spills out throughout Fetcham. If the gospel is about the veil that separates us from God being torn from top to bottom, then we need to be a community that takes full advantage of the access we have, we need to be a community that prays for one another and where people feel free to be open about their needs and seek prayer. And if the gospel is about the Lordship of Jesus, we need to be a worshipping community that always points to Him and a community that basks in the presence of God.

Only then will the world see what God is really like, how God's kingdom is different from what they experience elsewhere.

And, of course, for Church to function in that way does require good, wise and servant hearted leadership. As Rob Warner puts it, "the body of Christ is designed to be a marvel of spiritual engineering – a high performance body in which the gifts of the Spirit enable us to accomplish far more for Christ together than we could on our own." A church built solely or mainly around the gifts of its Rector or senior leaders will always be lopsided, highly developed in some areas and barely functioning in others. The Christ-empowered Church is one in which the life of Christ is fully expressed with the gifts of every member being released to their maximum potential.

And our priesthood is also to be exercised in the life of the world. The Church gathers to renew our participation in Christ's priesthood, to come closer to him in worship and offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. It comes together as a community to be built up, but then goes out to be priests in the daily business of the world, to stand before people on behalf of God.

I think it is quite easy to live life on what is sometimes called a dualistic model. In other words, to see our everyday lives and our spiritual lives as quite separate.

The pictures of the church we have looked at today tell a very different story. They tell of a building, a body, with Christ as the cornerstone or Head, and from which all other parts of our lives are supported. They tell us that plugging fully into the church is how we become better parents, better family members, better neighbours, better employees, better leaders, as we learn to minister to one another and allow others to minister to us.

So finally:

Perhaps we need to be reminded today that we are not individual Christians. Just like we don't choose our families, we don't get to choose those we do church with. Some we may find irritating but like it or not, they are all our brothers and sisters and in God's building plan they are part of the way God works in our own lives, refining us, knocking off sharp corners, developing in us the fruits of his spirit. So, let's fully commit to one another and be willing to share our real lives.

Perhaps we need to realise again that God wants to minister through us, that we are indeed priests. That he wants to give us gifts for the good of the body and that not to accept them is not an act of humility but a lack of trust in a loving God who knows us through and through. And perhaps God may be saying to some, you can't do everything. I love your enthusiasm but say no sometimes and allow others to step up to the mark.

Let me finish with a quotation. John Webster says this; "Church is not a struggle to make something happen but a lived attempt to make sense of, celebrate and bear witness to what has already been established by God's grace." It's good to remember that the Church is God's work and to take time to celebrate what God is doing among us.