

Living In Christ – Being the Church

Transfiguration Sunday

5 August 2012

Ephesians 2:11–3:21; Mark 9:2-10

Welcome to the second in a series of five sermons looking at the book of Ephesians. Last week we looked at what it means to be “in Christ” and at our role in God’s big plan to bring everything together in Christ.

A good summary of last week’s passage can be found in Carson, Moo and Morris’ Introduction to the New Testament where they state:

“You cannot miss the supreme place of God, who brings salvation despite the unworthiness of sinners. Nor can we overlook the greatness of Christ or the fact that the church, his body, occupies an important place in God’s working out of his great purpose.”

So in today’s passage, Paul then expands the core nature of who the Church is, and how God has brought this peculiar new community into existence. When we look at the Church that Paul addresses, we see a community threatened with division. But what we see in Paul’s letter lays the foundation for how very diverse and different groups of people are joined together as one family in Christ.

One of the key staple plots of numerous films, TV programmes and books is that of enemies becoming friends to overcome some great obstacle or challenge. We see this plot in a wide range of films, for example in kids films like Ice Age, where a Sloth, a Mammoth and a Sabre Tooth Tiger team up to return a human baby to its family. If you haven’t seen the film, I am sure that you can understand that this strange group struggled with the whole predator/prey dynamic... One of the big questions for the characters in the film is the question of what it means to be a “heard” as they struggle to come to terms with how their

participation in this new “herd” challenged their previous assumptions and patterns of behaviour.¹

As it turns out it, in reality, unlike the movies, it takes more than 90 minutes for enemies to become friends and the issues that need to be overcome for this to take place are far more complex. Take, for example, the history of the Treaty of Waitangi and relationships between Maori and Pakeha in Aotearoa New Zealand. We know how hard it is for two peoples from a very different cultural and social background to live in unity while maintaining a unique social and cultural identity.

So just think for a moment about the complexity of treaty negotiations, or about the amount of discord and anger you can create by going to a party and mentioning Maori Land Rights and the meaning of Tino Rangatiratanga. The reason I bring all this up is because up is because this is a good entry point to think about just how significant and miraculous it was to have Jews and Gentiles come together to worship Jesus in the early Church. This was by no means an easy or problem free development and it is instructive to note just how much of the New Testament is spent addressing the issue of how Gentiles and Jew now relate to each other and share the same identity through faith in Jesus Christ.²

The Jewish communities spread throughout the world of the first century had a number of key markers that showed that they were members of the community of God. These included circumcision, Sabbath observance and food purity regulations. From a Jewish perspective, if a gentile wanted to join in the worship of the God of Israel, they had to adopt these boundary markers and become Jews.³ In the case of the Jews accepting Gentiles into their mix, there was even a strong movement amongst Jewish Christians of the time to try and enforce these old boundary markers as these very clearly delineated who was in and who was out. Their observance to these traditions was a central aspect of the Jews maintaining their religion and identity throughout both the Diaspora and in occupied Israel.

¹ For more information about the movie, you can visit the IMDB page at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0268380/>
Other films where you see this type of plot line utilised are The Avengers, Die Hard with a Vengeance, Zoolander.

² This is not to mention the influence the history of the Church and Christian teaching has played in obscuring the revolutionary nature of the early Christian communities.

³ Some of these boundary markers were easier to adopt than others. For example, circumcision was a risky procedure that risked infection.

In chapter 2, verses 11 through to 22 of Ephesians, Paul asked his Gentile hearers to cast their minds back to the time they were outside of the covenant community, without God and without hope. They were aliens and strangers.

In stark contrast to the requirements of becoming a bona fide Jewish proselyte, Paul reminds the Gentiles in his audience that they now have a relationship with God and the rest of the covenant community because of the death and resurrection of Israel's messiah, the one Israelite who was fully faithful to God. Paul's assertion is that the messiah died not just to save Israel, but the whole world. He claimed that through these events, the walls that divided Jew and Gentile had been removed, along with the barriers, exclusions and hostility that previously existed.

The reason Paul gives for this is that salvation and forgiveness is obtained in exactly the same way by both Jews and Gentiles: through faith in Jesus and the resulting forgiveness of sins. This faith is now the key determining factor of who is a part of the community of God, and not the old physical external markers.⁴

The key idea here is that no one is excluded from the presence and power of God. There are no second class citizens in the kingdom of God. Because God is present in the community through the Holy Spirit, Paul uses the image of the temple to show that the gentiles have become part of the community of God. This is a truly radical and revolutionary fact.

However, this new community that Jesus is calling together is not one that exists for the purposes of its own members or self interests. The nature of the community is one that is committed to the type of radical discipleship to Jesus. This is a point that Paul is keen to emphasise for the remainder of Ephesians. It also happens to be a central point of Jesus' teaching that we have been following in the Gospel of Mark.

Today's gospel reading comes immediately after a crucial hinge point in Mark's narrative where Peter recognises and proclaims that Jesus is the messiah. This is

⁴ Disregarding these external barriers was a well know aspect of Paul's teaching in the first Century. In fact, when Paul was taken into Roman custody in Jerusalem, it was due to the false allegation that he had taken an Ephesian gentile (Trophemus) into the temple.

followed by Jesus telling his followers that he must die and be raised from the dead and that they must “take up their cross” and follow him. The call to costly discipleship is an important emphasis to keep in mind as we consider the character of the community Paul describes. The radical inclusivity of the Church, where both Jew and Gentile have been included through faith in Christ, should not be viewed as a warrant for libertinism, a community where anyone one is accepted because ‘anything goes’. Rather, Jew and Gentile are to serve God and each other by living a life patterned after Jesus, a life of costly discipleship.

Our reading in Mark goes on to tell the story of Peter, James and John experiencing the power of the kingdom, seeing Jesus transfigured and a perplexing encounter with two of the heroes of their scriptures: Moses and Elijah. They are overshadowed by a cloud and hear the words spoken: “this is my son the beloved, listen to him.” This must have been a troubling encounter and one about which they were sworn to secrecy about until after the resurrection.

Mark’s account of the transfiguration is reminiscent of Old Testament stories or “theophanies” such as God meeting with Israel on Mt Sinai and his interactions with the prophets. These events involved powerful revelations of God’s personal and holy presence. This forms an interesting connection point with what Paul is saying to us in Ephesians. The disciples’ experience of God’s personal presence and holiness in the transfiguration parallels Paul’s description of new believers “being built together into a dwelling place for God”. This is no light statement by Paul; just as the disciples encounter with the transfigured Jesus is accompanied by a call to obedience, Paul’s description of the church as a dwelling place for God is accompanied by a call to holiness.

The fact that the Gentiles are now included and have open access to God through Christ is described as a “mystery that was hidden”.⁵ It’s kind of like the sort of plot twist that we have come to expect towards the end of a reality TV show or soap opera. Suddenly, something has happened that has changed the game. However, unlike some plot twist to boost ratings, we are told that God planned this mystery from the beginning and that it is through this new community that God is at work to bring his healing and reconciliation to the world.

⁵ Eph.3:9.

Paul's response to this, and to his own calling to become the messenger to the gentiles, is to pray for his congregations. He prays that they may have a fuller experience and knowledge of God's love and that they will draw strength from this. This is a call for them to fully realise their identity and their calling as followers of Jesus.

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The question for us, then, is: how does having this view of what it means to be church change our attitude and participation in church? How does this description of what it means to be church fit with our own context and participation in Christian community?

Paul's description of what it means to be church can seem different from our experience of attending church and being a part of Christian community. However, there is more than meets the eye to what might initially seem mundane. As in the first century, the Church has the powerful potential to see former enemies and people who would have nothing to do with each other brought together around the same table, a powerful sign of God's reconciling love for the world.

How does having this view of what it means to be church *change* things for us? If we hold that all are equal in the body of Christ, how does this challenge how we use our time and resources?

I think one of the encouraging things is that as we wrestle with this it is God's Spirit that is at work and that God takes us as we are and uses us in the positions that we are in to achieve his purpose of declaring "the manifold wisdom of God" in Christ to the whole world. We can trust that God is present here amongst us, growing us in himself both individually and together to help make this a reality.

One great example of this is the work of global missions group and to see the result of the signs of our connections overseas. This reminds us of our connectedness and our unity. The fact that all who have faith in Christ are united as one people, calls us to support those who are our brothers and sisters overseas – people like Rosie, Jos and Adrienne in Egypt, or the work of the

Carpenters Kids program for HIV AIDS orphans in Tanzania. We really need to continue to support such initiatives overseas.

Jesus likened the Kingdom of God to Mustard seed, which even though they are tiny, have the potential to grow into decent sized plants. So even if what we have to bring seems small compared to Paul's grand vision, God is faithful and will use us to work for the good of his kingdom.