

“The Church: A New Humanity In A New Community”

7 June 2020 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship:

Well, good morning everyone, it's good to be with you, and I want to say thank you to those who led our services over the last couple of weeks: to David a couple of weeks ago and particularly to the Sunday Special and K2 leaders and some of the children who led us so very well last week in the children's service, and looking at Jesus as our superhero. Thank you for doing that. And today, we're going to look again at the letter that Paul wrote to the Ephesians, in Chapter 2 today. And we'll see that God's purpose wasn't just that we would be saved, though important as that was, but that we would be brought into a new humanity and therefore into a new community. And that's an incredible vision, and it's a vision that the world needs. And as Katie was telling us last week, we, the Church's beginning, came at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, in response to Jesus' death and resurrection. That outpouring continues today, and the Church grows throughout all the world and it is indeed a global phenomenon. So, let's begin by singing a song that says hope of the nations, that Jesus is the hope of the nations.

Praise: Hope Of The Nations

Prayers of Adoration and Confession:

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for the privilege of gathering together and worshipping You through beautiful music, reflecting on our lives this past week through meditation of Your Word, and opening our hearts and minds through heartfelt prayer. Although due to the lockdown brought about by the pandemic we may be physically apart, we as a church are in no way separate as You have told us that, “For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). We are grateful for this invisible, yet unbreakable, bond You have given us as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and more importantly, the salvation from certain death You have given us, *all* as a gift from You, not by our own works, but by Your grace through our faith.

It is becoming alarmingly clear that the world that we had been familiar with will be changed in many ways, and that we may have to be prepared to live a new normal way of life, at least for the foreseeable future. In a way, the unfolding of this sequence of events may be considered parallel to what the citizens of Ephesus were facing during Paul's time: a major port city and gateway to Asia, inhabited by a proud citizenry becoming more anxious due to economic decline. We thank You for the timely teaching of the letter to Ephesians that You are giving us through Your servants Sam and David. Indeed, we know that we are born of sin. Nonetheless, You loved us in spite of ourselves and “made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions” (Ephesians 2:5).

Better yet, You have done even more than give us life. You have lifted us in Christ, working such a transformation that throughout the coming ages we will display the incomparable riches of Your grace. All this was done by Your, and Yours only, initiative, a gracious act that does not rest on any merit of our own. At the beginning of today's service, we ask of You, Lord, to open our eyes and ears, our hearts and minds, and bring about concrete action thereafter, so that we may serve as one humble embodiment of a true, living church, faithfully and prayerfully following Your path. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

Sermon:

So thank you, Juliana, for reading our scripture today. It is a great passage, Ephesians 2:11-22: *a new humanity and a new community - the Church*. The news over the past week has been dominated by the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man who pleaded for his life while a white police officer had his knee on his neck, causing his death. I grew up in Northern Ireland, where the hatred between British and Irish, Nationalist and Unionist, Protestant and Roman Catholic led to over 3600 deaths. And the context for today's passage is the conflict between the Jew and the Gentile, one of ongoing and long standing hatred. And Paul is not immune to this, and he actually experienced this. Let me read you a little bit from **Acts 21:27-32**.

So, that is just an example of that hatred that we see between the Jews and the Gentiles. And sadly, I could bring many more examples, some much closer to home. There is much wrong with our world. It is presently full of division, racism, anger, hatred, violence, and death. And I believe it was G.K. Chesterton who wrote in The Times, "*Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's Wrong with the World?' I am. Yours truly.*" So, we are the problem! God saw the mess of our sin, He saw the awful consequences of that sin and He set about doing something about it. And so in v.15, "His purpose was to create in Himself one new man (one new humanity) out of two, thus making peace". He came, He got involved, He spoke, He lived out the reality of this new way of self-sacrificing love and He died to make it happen and the BIG question and the challenge for us is do we believe, will we follow and commit ourselves to God's vision - God's vision of a new humanity in a new community, the Church?

And as we consider this great vision for the Church, we will have to be self-critical, and I want to challenge us to consider our ways so that as the world watches on, they might see a better example of the outworking of God's vision. So let's take a step back, let's consider the gospel, let's see the example of Jesus and what He has accomplished and then we can collectively begin to think, "What will it mean to be the Church in the world today?" If you have your Bibles, it would be good to open them at this passage, Ephesians 2.

I. Without Hope And Without God (vv. 11-12)

So firstly, we are to "remember that you were without hope and without God in the world." That's what it says in vv.11-12. So, what is wrong with the world? "I am," said G.K. Chesterton. And I think that's important, because it's true; it gets to the heart of the world's problem. Humanity has a serious flaw. It's a narrative, of course, that's rejected by many, but the gospel and the Bible say, and Paul recognises, and he says it twice here, *remember what you were*. You were without God and without hope in the world, because of your transgressions and sins, which mean your rebellion towards God and missing the standard set by God. The full extent of our hopelessness has been clearly set out in Chapter 2. We are spiritually dead to God. We are the focus of His wrath. We're excluded, we are separated from God, we, as non-Jews, didn't even have access to the promises of God. And so it's important that we call to mind this sinful, hopeless state. And the reason for that is so that we might not think that we can solve the problem of our racism, of bigotry, our pride, our anger by some self-effort, but that the situation of the human heart is hopeless and only the love and the grace and the rescue of God through Christ is able to save us.

II. But Now In Christ (vv. 13-18)

But that's, of course, not where it stops. It goes on, "but now in Christ" (vv.13-18). We are to remember what Christ has achieved for us. So, we were hopelessly dead; we were separated from God and the Jewish nation. "*But now in Christ Jesus,*" says Paul, we have been brought near (v.13).

This happened, of course, through the death of Jesus (that's what he means by "His blood") and the barrier has been removed (v.14). How did that actually happen? Well, he talks about the Law: "the Law was abolished" (v.15). It separated us from God. So, we broke the Ten Commandments, the Moral Law, but Christ kept them perfectly. We failed to fulfil the Ceremonial Law, the sacrificial system, but Christ did that by His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. And therefore, both Jews and Gentiles have peace with God.

Two wonderful things happen as a consequence of that. Firstly, both have access to God, and the spiritual reality of that happened, of course, at the cross, when the curtain that separated the temple precinct from the most Holy place was torn in two and everyone was able to go into the presence of God. And secondly, both Jew and Gentile come on the same basis. Look at v.17: because they hear this gospel and they respond to it, and by believing they gain access to the Father by the Spirit. And so they become a new creation in Christ, and the barrier is removed. And actually, symbolically that happened in AD 70, when a one and a half metre wall that separated Jews from Gentiles in the temple was totally destroyed by a Roman army (and the temple itself was also destroyed). You see, but now in Christ Jesus, both Jew and Gentile have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

III. Fellow Citizens And Family (v.19)

And thirdly, we see that "consequently," that's the important bit, "you are . . . fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (vv.19-22). *A new humanity in a new community - the Church*. So we are citizens of God's Kingdom. He is our King and we are to follow Him. Therefore, being citizens of God's Kingdom isn't about nationality or geography, or social status, or gender. All of us come through hearing the gospel and responding, and we are therefore citizens. We are companions, we're comrades, we're equals within the Kingdom of God. And we're also family: God is our Father, we are brothers and sisters, adopted with the full rights of sons, as we saw in Chapter 1:5.

IV. A Holy Temple (vv.20-22)

And then Paul gives us another metaphor, another picture, a building metaphor, one of the temple (vv.22-24). This is what Paul says is the consequence of accepting Jesus as our Saviour: we are citizens of God's kingdom, we are members of God's family, and then he tells us how our unity in this building, this Temple, is maintained. So, here's the checklist - let's see how we're doing.

A. Built On Jesus, The Apostles, And The Prophets (v.20)

Firstly, we are built on Jesus, the apostles and the prophets (v.20), our foundation and chief cornerstone. So what does that mean in practice? Well, it means that the church is founded on the life and the work of Jesus Christ (as I've been saying) and the teaching of the apostles and the prophets, which means the Old and the New Testaments in our Bible. The Church, and the people in the Church, will be stable, will grow, will be united when it's members are committed to the truth and teaching of the Word of God, when they desire to read, and listen, and believe, and obey its truth. And so, the teaching of the Word of God is central to all the Church does. So, it's important that all we do is constantly viewed with the Word of God in mind, and in our activities we need to keep the primacy of the teaching of the Word of God in all that we do. We're built on Jesus, the apostles and the prophets.

B. Joined Together In Christ (v. 21)

And secondly, "in Him, the whole building is joined together" (v. 21). You see, culturally we are moving away from community to individuality. But one of the good things people are

remarking upon is the COVID-19 crisis has forced us to see the importance of community. And so we're missing touch and sight, togetherness, marriage celebrations, our gatherings of sport and culture. We have seen the importance of national unity, of community unity, and we are beginning to appreciate how precious that is. And the Church is a precious place of unity, because we are in Christ. The challenge for those who believe is, "how important is the Church for us?" Verse 19: "you are members of God's household!" Verse 21: "we are joined together!" Verse 22: "we are built together!" And so we are to be committed and wholehearted in this new community from every nation, committed and wholehearted to this unity, committed and wholehearted to working together, and that is what the Church is by its very nature.

C. A Residence For The Holy Spirit (v. 22)

And thirdly, we are a residence for the Holy Spirit. We are committed to holiness. Holiness is important; it's a distinctive of the church because it's a distinctive character of God. We are commanded to be holy as God is holy, and we are to be attractive in the sense of the beauty of holiness. Holiness is a consequence of the living and active presence of God, through the Holy Spirit in our lives (v.22). And, as Paul will later describe to us and we'll look at that later, we will see that this works through every aspect of our life. And so, the Bible speaks of the beauty of holiness reaching every part of our lives.

So, the Church is the place where God has chosen, in His wisdom, to reside on earth. We are an expression of Jesus in Dublin, of *His* presence. *And if there is a greater privilege and responsibility, I cannot think of it.* So, we are to remember what we were. We are to remember what we have become, that we are a new humanity placed in a new community, and this is God's purpose for us. It's important that we remember this; it's important that we live it out, because we are in Christ.

Let's pray. Dear heavenly Father, we thank You that You sent Your Son, Jesus, to die that we might be saved from our sin. We are thankful that in Christ we are united with all who believe in Him, and You have called us to a life of holiness and service of You and others. Help us, Lord, to understand the wonder of this. Forgive us when we take our calling lightly and give us more of your Holy Spirit, that we will be wholehearted in our service and worship. We ask in Jesus name, amen.

So, let us continue to worship God as our King as we sing "King of Kings, Majesty" and we will sing in that, *we live to serve Your majesty.*

Praise: IPH 452 King Of Kings, Majesty

Prayers for Others:

O Eternal God, we thank You for all the blessings that You pour out from Your heart of love into our lives each and every day. We thank You for the gifts You shower upon us of faith and grace, for the gift of Your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Your Holy Word, and the gift of Your Holy Church. We thank You that You are with us, that You are for us, both in our rejoicing and in our weeping. We trust in Your unfailing love, O Sovereign Lord. So 'tune our hearts to sing Thy grace, as Your streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise'. Father God, we thank You that we can come to You with all that is in our hearts and that You hear and answer our prayers according to Your good and perfect will.

We pray for our world, and we think of all that has been said and done since the tragic death of Mr. George Floyd in Minneapolis. We pray for Mr. Floyd's family and for the people of the USA in this time of pain and protest and division. We pray for the Church in that country, that You would help our brothers and sisters to be witnesses to the Gospel. We pray for all those members of our congregation and for people across this city whose lives are impacted by intolerance, discrimination and racism. We pray, O Lord, for Your help to be people who reflect with humility on our own attitudes and who repent of all our own failures; we pray to be people who do not walk by on the other side of the road, to be people who stand with those who are excluded and marginalised and with those who suffer. Help us, O Lord, to be faithful ambassadors for Christ.

We pray for members of our congregation, families, neighbours, friends and those we know and love who are in particular need at this time because of ill-health of body or of mind, for those with failing health, for those who mourn, and those living with anxieties of all kinds. We pray for Your help in the circumstances of these times - for those weary of living in homes that are too quiet, and for those exasperated of living in homes that are too noisy. We pray for those separated from loved ones, remembering in particular our sisters and brothers with families and friends in Brazil, praying for the government and people of that country at this time.

We pray for people facing stressful and difficult circumstances in their working lives - people who interact with many others in the course of their day, people who have responsibilities in businesses and schools and creches, for all those working in care homes and hospitals. We pray for those facing the challenges of adapting to working at home. We pray for those facing uncertainty about their jobs and for those who have lost their jobs.

Remembering all that You have done for us, we commit our prayers to You, O Lord, and give You all the praise and honour and glory. We say: 'Here I raise my Ebenezer, hither by Thy help I've come. And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, safely to arrive at home. Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God. He, to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood'. Amen.

Closing Praise: IPH 150 The Church's One Foundation

Benediction:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.