

Talk 10: What about the Church?

Church is a loaded word. Somebody once said to me:

I wish we could do away with the word "church". It has become so mixed in its meanings - buildings, institutions, a guilty history, a wimpish image. Perhaps we need to start again.

The word "church" comes through the German "Kirche" which, in turn, comes from the Greek "kuriakos" which means: "*belonging to the Lord.*". The Church is simply "people belonging to the Lord."

If we want to find the simplest image of church, we go back to the Gospels and look at the first "people who belonged to the Lord": people with Jesus at the centre, travelling where Jesus takes them.

The Church is People with Jesus at the Centre

That is the core identity of the church of Jesus Christ. The Church is not defined institutionally. It is defined relationally.

It is reckoned that there may be over 100 images of church in the New Testament, but the most common ones (the people of God, the household of God, the bride of Christ) all emphasise the importance of relationships - with Christ and with each other.

One famous image is of the church as "the body of Christ". Christ is the head and we are the body. In wonderful cartoon imagery Paul imagines the absurdity of a nose or an ear trying to go it alone! Neither should we. We need each other to follow Jesus together – all in one body.

Paul points out the absurdity of the foot claiming to be more important than the hand, for each part is equally important. He points out that the least visible parts may even be the most important parts. Who would claim that a white blood cell, which controls the immune system, is not vitally important? – invisible though it be.

I can think of a particular local church which has as its logo: "Where everyone counts".

The Church is People on a Journey with Jesus

Jesus took his disciples on a journey that changed their views of God, other people and themselves. Our hope is that this Alpha course has been a journey of exploration for all of us. When the course ends, the journey will have only just begun. We hope that you will find ways of continuing and sharing that journey as part of the church - the people of God on a journey.

To be part of the church of Jesus Christ is to be part of a movement - a movement that has roots that go back into the stories of the Jewish people travelling from Egypt to Canaan through the desert - a motif that for centuries has inspired Christians in the ups and downs of the journey of faith.

It is a movement that has stretched round the world touching every culture - so that almost one third of the world's population claims to be part of this church of Jesus Christ.

It is a movement that is at a very significant stage of the journey in our own country. I believe that, despite horror stories about the decline of the church and even abuses in the church, we are seeing the church of Jesus Christ learning to be a new kind of church for the 21st century. The journey may be difficult and dangerous, but enriching, exhilarating and worth it.

The Church is People around Jesus who Gather and Scatter

Jesus invited people to gather round him and to be with him, then to be sent out into society to make a difference - like salt and light.

About 10 years ago my wife and I sat in the ruins of Whitby Abbey, an old centre of Celtic Christianity. I sent a postcard with a picture of the ruins saying that I had seen a vision of the church of the future: a church without roof and a church without walls - open to God in prayer and worship and open to the world in loving service.

That sums up the church: *gathered* together for worship, prayer, support and learning - in a massive range of styles that have formed into different strands of the church family; and *scattered* to be the church in our workplaces, our homes and our local communities.

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Picking up on the Celtic theme again, I love the description of the old Celtic monasteries meeting around the themes of heart, home and hub:

heart: nurturing the heart for God

home: offering a home for the stranger

hub: being a hub to resource us for the journey of life.

Here are three good reasons for being part of a church fellowship:

1. We need our hearts to be nurtured in our relationship with God.

I am grateful to the people who have taught me, befriended me, challenged me, prayed for me, encouraged me. Without the church of Jesus Christ, I would not be here.

We discover God among people who are discovering God. That is the core business of the church - nurturing our heart for God through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

2. We need a place where we are not strangers and where we in turn welcome strangers.

We all need a place where we belong and can associate with people who welcome us. We were made for this. It is part of God's design.

A negative, ugly manifestation of this human tendency is being seen socially and politically in the emergence of racism and xenophobia in the recent elections in Burnley and France. That is not the dynamic of the church with Jesus at the centre.

The people who gathered round Jesus included the equivalent of a member of the UDA and a member of the IRA. The followers of Jesus Christ are from every nation under the sun. The final vision of the church in heaven is of a multitude from every tribe and nation - international and multicultural.

The church is meant to be a like a show-house of God's society - where there is a home for all of us and we can walk around and see the kind of multicoloured society God wants.

3. We need to be supported in our daily life and work.

It is easy to go about our daily work as though God were not interested in us or our work. To be honest, some Christians struggle to make the connections between what goes on in the workplace and what goes on, say, in Sunday worship.

We need to help one another to "be" the church where we are - the church beyond the congregation meeting of a Sunday, a network church that supports us to be everywhere the people with Jesus at the centre, travelling where Jesus takes us....travelling with us into our offices and businesses.

When I look around, I see that Whitby vision becoming a reality - we are becoming a church without walls! Welcome to it.