

Whose perspective?

Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7 & Revelation 5:6-14

It is very easy in our self-obsessed world, where the whole emphasis is on self-fulfillment and “You’re worth it”, to feel we are not up to it and we’re not making it. It is easy to forget that, as Christians, we are actually not alone. Not actually alone in two senses, first of all God has said He will never leave us or forsake us and no one can pluck us out of His hands. That is our strong foundation, God has set His love upon us, undeserving, mixed up people that we are. We are loved by God! I am so thankful that this church has, as its centre at the front of the church, a cross. That constant reminder that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. That constant reminder that Jesus was obedient unto death, even to death upon a cross, to bring us salvation. This is also one of the great things about worship, we are reminded of who God is and of His love for us, it resets our thinking, it puts our compass back to true north, it scatters the gloom and darkness. Have a look at Psalm 73 as a good example. The psalmist looks around and says all my efforts to be good seem to have come to nothing and the evildoers seem to be living happy lives, it’s not fair! He then goes onto say:

“When I became embittered and my innermost being was wounded,
I was stupid and didn’t understand; I was an unthinking animal toward You.
Yet I am always with You; You hold my right hand.
You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will take me up in glory.
Who do I have in heaven but You? And I desire nothing on earth but You.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever.”
(Psalm 73:21-26).

The psalmist reminds himself of the constant presence and faithfulness of God and finds peace for his troubled mind. That’s what worship can do for us, that’s why it is so important to retell the mercies and steadfast love of the Lord.

But sometimes, we just can’t get through the fog. We read our Bibles, we attend church and join in as best we can but God still seems so far away. But that’s where the second part of not being alone comes in. Sometimes the Spirit of God speaks to us directly as He assures us of His love and forgiveness but often He speaks through the people of God, the church. We are not alone, we are part of a worldwide community of those who bow the knee to Jesus and acknowledge Him to be Lord and Saviour.

I heard Greg Holmes from Victory Church speak last week and he reminded us that as humans we tend to be tribal, to gravitate to those like us, whether that is from the same school, neighborhood, nation, people group, age group, interest group, educational background, social background, whatever. We tend to be tribal and feel at home with people like us. Let me introduce you to the global church. We had that wonderful, mind blowing reading from Revelation 5: “And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.’” (Rev. 5:9-10). Here is the global church of God “from every tribe and language and people and nation”, totally cutting across every man made barrier. Jesus has made one out of the many. You are now part of the global people of God. This was the plan of God from the beginning, a global people for His possession. Abram was promised that through him all nations would be blessed. Isaiah, in our reading in chapter 49, looked forward to the servant of the Lord who would not only raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel but also

be a light for the nations, that God's salvation might reach to the end of the earth. And we are part of that grand plan of God.

Just take a moment to see the phrases used to describe the church in the NT – body, bride, people, family, vine, and note how these words imply an **organic** connection. Snyder and Runyon also point out that “Even static “building” and “temple” images become organic ones: “living stones”, a growing building, a temple animated by the Spirit (1 Peter 2:4-6; Eph.2:19-22), Metaphors and models are powerful. Think of the church as a building, and it becomes building centred and architecture dependent. Think of the church as an organization, and it becomes preoccupied with organizational forms and programs. Think of the church organically, and it focuses on what makes for healthy life.” So the church is not an unconnected heap of Christians. This is of course seen clearly in Paul's writing on the church where he frequently describes the church as the body of Christ.

David Watson put it so clearly 40 years ago:

“Paul clearly has in mind something more than the sum of believers in one place. Had this been his intention he would probably have referred to the body of Christians, but in fact he specifically writes about the body of Christ. It seems clear that he is speaking of an organic unity, in which Christians not only belong to Christ and to one another within His body; they also abide in Him and find life in Him.” David Watson also went onto say:

“This once again needs to be thoroughly grasped by Christians in an age in which many see the church as little more than a club. A club, according to my dictionary is ‘an association of persons united by some common interest, meeting periodically for co-operation or conviviality.’ But this club mentality will not do for the church. The church is the body of Christ, and Christians are inescapably and organically members of it.” This actually cuts through all the tribal barriers we put up or seek to shelter behind. God has set His love upon us and included us in His body, the church. The barriers between us have been broken down, for in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

If we are in an organic union with our fellow Christians, then this brings with it some community responsibilities. I want to briefly outline three such responsibilities today:

- 1) Practical care and support for one another. Paul in Romans commands us, as Christians, to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). This implies a real empathy with what our fellow Christians are experiencing, a real entering into their joys and sorrows. Sometimes tears are more powerful than words. Perhaps some of us men, in particular, need to learn how to weep with those who weep. This is one way of genuinely bearing one another's burdens. The writer to the Hebrews says something similar “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb. 13:3). Note the “as ifs”, this is a real entering into the other persons experience. And we are expected to show this kind of love to our fellow Christians. It even extends to the sharing of money and possessions, for Paul says “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal 6:10). As Christians we are to do good to all, but we have a special bond to our family of believers. So Paul collected money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem from the churches in his care in Greece. This was part of the worldwide practical care of the church for the church.
- 2) Pray for one another, it's another way of showing care for people and giving them time in our thoughts. We must never underestimate the power of prayer. And yet

sometimes “I’ll pray for you” can be a cop out, something more practical and costly is needed. We are fortunate that each week our church does prepare intercessions for the world, our nation, our diocese, locality and church family.

- 3) Receive from one another; we are part of the worldwide family of God. Many of us have been blessed by Christian books written by people from other countries – we value their spiritual insights. Recently Jean and I visited Ffald-y-Brenin in Pembrokeshire. A very small Christian Retreat Centre tucked away in a remote part of Pembrokeshire in the south-west of Wales. Yet out of such a small, insignificant place God has brought to the wider church the vision of local houses of prayer. Don't be put off by the name, this is not some kind of monastic community, but a tool that God has given the church to see the kingdom of God break into our communities, with His power and presence. Next Saturday is the training day for local houses of prayer, and I encourage you to come along. I can promise you that you will be blessed and given new insights into prayer. I also can't help a smile as the man who is coming to lead our day is Steve Mitchell from Invercargill. For some Invercargill is as insignificant as Ffald-y-Brenin! God loves to take the insignificant in this world and work with it. But the worldwide church also gives us great examples of faith that we do well to learn from. Our own problems fade in significance when we see the lives of other Christians. I want to introduce you to Archbishop Ben Kwashi. Ben is Archbishop of Jos, in Northern Nigeria. I want to play a video of his testimony at the Lausanne Conference in Cape Town in 2010. Before I do I want to give you some background to Nigeria to understand Ben's story. Nigeria is the most populous African nation and is situated in West Africa. The country is roughly split north/south on religious lines with Moslems in the north and Christians in the south. Jos is the capital of Plateau State which traditionally was a Christian region within the majority Moslem North. Jean and I well remember meeting Ben and his delightful wife, Gloria, a few years ago at a missions conference. [Play video]. Ben finished his testimony with these words: “I have a gospel to proclaim, I have a gospel worth living for, I have a gospel worth dying for”. Think about that for a moment. It is noteworthy that Ben's message to his people has always been one of non-retaliation and trust in God. I also want to tell you about Sharoon Masih, aged 17, from Pakistan. Last month his mother, Razia Bibi, said goodbye to him on his fourth day of attending his new high school. That day at school he was beaten to death by his Moslem classmates because he was a Christian. He is part of the worldwide church of God, as are his grieving parents. Sometimes when we hear stories like these, our own problems fade in significance, but this is the worldwide Christian family that we belong to.

Those were two powerful testimonies from the worldwide body of Christ. We are not alone and they are not alone, together we are part of the global church, indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus.