

## **Our Church Ephesians 2: 11-22 Mark 2: 13-17**

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We have been thinking over the past few weeks about our church- what is it for? It's a community of those who know they are forgiven sinners, who having understood what Jesus has done for them on the cross, come together as the body of Christ to praise Him together, to learn and serve together and as Stephen was telling us, to become mature in Christ. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a wonderful picture of the church and God's purposes for it. And those purposes are vast- so much bigger than we might grasp. In Chapter 3 of his letter Paul writes

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purposes which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Wow! The church is God's plan for the salvation of the world. And we, amazingly are a part of that. But we don't deserve it. In Chapter 2 we learn that our coming to faith is all to do with Jesus and nothing to do with what we have done. Chapter 2 v 8 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works that no-one can boast." We come to faith through grace- Great riches at Christ's Expense. And those riches were to be available to all.

Paul goes in in Chapter 2 in our passage today to point out to the Ephesian church that something truly amazing had happened for those of them who were Gentiles. Through the years visitors to the temple in Jerusalem were confronted with large walls through which Gentiles could not go, on penalty of death. The doors of every Jewish home were closed to Gentiles. A Gentile could not go into the house of a Jewish family and eat with them. If a Jew married a Gentile he or she would be treated as if they had died.

This is what your life was like Paul is saying. "Remember," he says in verse 12 "You were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenant of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. " They were separated from God and separated from one

another. "But now," Paul says, "in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." Jesus, Paul says has taken these two groups- Jews and Gentiles and made them one. So in the church, the body of believers in Jesus Christ, there are now both Jews and Gentiles who formerly hated each other but who now are reconciled not just to God but also to each other.

I think it's hard for us to comprehend how difficult it must have been for Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians to kneel side by side as forgiven sinners. But says Paul in verse 19, to his Gentile audience, you are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. No longer outsiders but insiders, accepted and equal.

No longer are they excluded from the temple but Paul is saying that they are now part of God's new temple which is made of people and not of stone. Paul tells us in verse 20 that this temple is built on the strong foundation of the apostles and prophets. It's built on Jesus' teaching. Jesus had chosen special apostles whom he chose, called and authorised to teach in His name. The twelve plus Paul, James and a few others. What they taught they expected the church to believe and preserve.

Not only would this temple have strong foundations but it also had a cornerstone. V 20 The cornerstone was of crucial importance to keeping a building steady and in line. And this cornerstone wasn't just a lump of stone. It was Jesus himself whose role was to hold the growing temple together. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

Peter puts it this way in his first letter: As you come to him, the living stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering special spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

So we who are Gentiles have not only been forgiven for our sins but are welcomed into a spiritual house where as living stones we are being built together. Isn't that a wonderful picture of the church? And who lives in this house? V 22 tells us the answer. A dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

Now this is such good news that we don't want to keep it to ourselves. This is a living temple which keeps on growing and our job as its living stones is

to reach out to those who are not yet part of the structure. We have seen what a challenge it was for the Ephesian church to have Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians being built together into the structure. What about us? We want those around us in the village to feel welcome if they come and see what goes on in here. For some people coming through that wooden door is a big step. At the midnight service on Christmas Eve a young man sat outside through the whole service. He couldn't make it through the door. There is someone who now comes regularly to church who said that she came on a Sunday morning a few times before she could pluck up the courage to come through the door.

Thank God that when she did come she was made to feel welcome and now she has taken her place as part of that living temple. Those of us inside the church have a responsibility to make visitors feel that welcome. How good are we at doing that? Do we talk to visitors? Ask their names? Invite them to things? Invite them to lunch?

Sometimes a challenge to us is that people we meet in church are not like us. Our gospel reading shows the challenge that Jesus gave his followers. Walking past a tax collector's booth he saw Levi and spoke to him. To the disciples' shock he said "Follow me" and to their amazement Levi got up from his seat and followed him. But worse was to come. We read in verse 13, "While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples for there were many who followed him." The Jews hated the tax collectors. They were seen as collaborators working with the Romans to collect taxes for them. And many of them were dishonest, using their position of power to line their own pockets too.

And now here were the disciples in Levi's house having a meal with him and his tax collector friends. The teachers of the law ask them, "Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners?" I would imagine that the disciples were asking themselves the same question.

But Jesus is clear. He can see past the tax collector's table to the man who needs saving. He, who knows all things, knows that Levi will end up writing the first gospel account. He replies, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners." He knows that Levi or Matthew as we call him needs redemption. In order to find forgiveness and faith he needs to spend time with Jesus and come to

know Him as Saviour and Lord. If Jesus wants to bring people like Levi to faith, then he feels that if he stays away from tax collectors and sinners, then he is behaving like a doctor who only deals with the healthy. It's the sick who need a doctor Jesus is saying and it's sinners who need me.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s said, "The church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members." If we're not careful church can become like a social club. But in fact the church is an embassy where God's kingdom is represented to the world.

We should be speaking on behalf of Jesus to the nation around us. Speaking in words and speaking in actions. We should be living such an attractive life that others are drawn in. As Jesus said in John 13, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." How can we show love to those in the village? Can we invite folk to things or help them practically? Can we help out with the Harwellcome on a Thursday afternoon, or go on the rota for Fledglings? Or come to the monthly coffee morning to meet folk who don't come to church?

In eating with Levi and his friends Jesus was showing them love and opening up the way for them to come to faith in him. Jesus sowed love, just as the farmer sowed his seed. Some of the seed fell in unpromising places, but he kept on sowing.

Let's be the kind of church where we welcome newcomers, where we find someone new to talk to after church, where we commit to using our gifts to serve and build up the body and where we grow together into the holy temple we read about in verse 21. It's not always easy to get to know people on a Sunday morning. Why not join a homegroup where you meet with a much smaller group of people week by week. You look at the Bible together and grow spiritually but you also get to know one another and grow to trust the group and pray for one another. Lent starts next week and this would be a great time to commit to coming to a homegroup for a specific time.

If you would be happy to pray for the body of believers in our benefice and you haven't already got one of our Prayer Diaries then come and collect one from me afterwards. And let's pray that we too here in Harwell and Chilton can be "built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit."

