

## Sermon: 'Why the Church?'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> June 2010. 6.30pm

### **LESSON: Psalm 78:1-8 & Ephesians 4:1-6**

Last Sunday we had the privilege of two special services here at Central Hall. In the morning there was a Confirmation Service, when 2 people were baptised and 5 people confirmed, and we welcomed 23 people into our church fellowship whose memberships had been transferred from other churches and countries during the past 12 months. In the evening, we enjoyed that splendid celebration as Methodist World leaders from about 90 countries gathered for a week's consultation and our worship reflected a rich diversity of culture and language. With all its diversity and exuberance it was a foretaste of heaven!

Today, our British Methodist Conference is meeting in Portsmouth. One of the special events of today is the Ordination of men and women to the Ministry, ministry of Word and Sacrament and the ministry of the Diaconal Order. Three people, who have been part of our life here at Central Hall are amongst the ordinands: Ken Chalmers and Dawn Carne (who spent time here on student placements) and Tim Swindell (Chairman of "The Company").

These various events have focussed our minds on The Church. But *why* The Church? Why did God include The Church in His plans? Why did Jesus gather people together and place great stress upon the life and unity of this group of people? And why do we still make so much of the Church? What is it all about? What is it for?

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There are three images in the New Testament that give us some answers to this kind of question.

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The first image is a phrase used by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. He talks about *The Household of Faith*.

The Church is a gathering of people who believe. And what do they believe? Well, the doctrines of the Church have been summed up in various ways. The first and simplest Christian creed was one of just three words: Jesus is Lord. And then the Creeds were formulated, especially the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed – both of which we use in worship. They are statements of Trinitarian faith, speaking of God the Father, our Creator, God the Son who came to be our Saviour, and God the Holy Spirit who gives us the life of faith. And the heart of our believing is about what God has done. And an important part of our role is in "keeping the story of God alive", as someone once put it or – in the words of the psalmist: "one generation shall declare your works to another".

Let us make no mistake: Doctrine is important. What we believe affects how we behave.

We may be thankful that we don't live in the days when believing the wrong thing led to being burnt at the stake. But it is dangerous to absorb the spirit of our age that so often seems to say: "believe what you like, anything goes, and it's all much the same anyway!"

The Household of Faith is that gathering of people who have come to believe in Jesus, as God's Son and as our Lord and Saviour. As we read through John's gospel we are given a very clear indication as to the fact that this is why John wrote his gospel – "in order that people might believe, and believing might have life". He was passionate that people should believe in Jesus, and consequently have life to the full. Believing is central to the gospel.

And this business of "believing" is more than just assenting to certain truths in our minds. The business of believing goes to a deeper level of "putting our trust" in Jesus. The story is told about the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century tight rope walker, Charles Blondin, who used to entertain people with his skills. He became so advanced that he was able to cross the Niagara Falls on a tightrope. People gathered to watch him. Before he began he shouted to the crowd: "Do you believe I can walk across the falls?" They shouted back "Yes, we do". And he did. On another day he went to the falls with a wheel barrow: "Do you believe I can push this barrow across the water fall?" "Yes, we do" they cried. And he did. On another day he arrived at the water fall and shouted to the watching crowd: "Do you believe I can walk across the falls with a man on my back?" "Yes, we do", they shouted in response. "Then who will let me carry them?" he asked. But the volunteers were rather slow coming forward!

The Christian business of believing is akin to that. It is about believing, but not a mere academic belief in God. The household of Faith, the Church, is the gathering of people who not only believe in God with their heads but who have put their trust in Him. That is the acid test of faith.

That trust takes us on a step further. It takes us on to actions and life style. When Paul used that phrase: "The Household of Faith" he was talking about a very practical expression of caring and love that Christians should exercise as an outcome of their faith. "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who are of the household of faith." In one of our former communion service liturgies, those words used to be read at the moment in the service when we took a special offering "for the poor," our benevolent fund.

The Church is, firstly, a company of believers, people who may be able to say a creed to express their beliefs, but – more than that – people who have put their trust in Christ, and whose trust spills out into actions.

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The second image in the New Testament that gives us an answer to our question: "Why the Church?" is another phrase used by Paul. It is "The Body of Christ".

For Paul, this was a very important image. He shared it in the passage we have read this evening in the letter to the Ephesians. And, in his letter to the Corinthians, he spells it out even more fully.

The body is important. It is the way we can express who we really are. The muscles in our face can be used to smile or frown. Our hands can be used to hit someone in anger or help someone out of compassion. Our bodies are the main means that we have for expressing who we really are and what we really think and feel. That's why we find it so difficult to watch children who are so severely disabled that they can't walk or talk. That's why most of us find it so hard when visiting our sister, Omoyeni, (one of our choir members who has been in hospital for over 12 months, and unable, for all that time, to express what she is thinking or wanting). Our bodies are such an essential part of our lives.

So Jesus called a group of people to be His friends and followers. Having taught them about God's Kingdom and trained them in the things He wanted them to do He left them to be His visible presence in the world. Through the giving of His Spirit at Pentecost Jesus gave gifts and abilities to those who had believed on Him in order that His work would continue to be done. This group of people, the Church, were to be His body – expressing His heart.

St. Teresa of Avila, who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was a reformer within the Carmelite Order. She took up this theme about the Body of Christ when she wrote the words:

*"Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the earth, Yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good And yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now."*

Paul Althaus was a German Lutheran theologian of the last century. He put the same idea very simply in this way:

"The message of God's mercy, as it was a bodily reality in Christ, must repeatedly become embodied in the love that seeks the lost. The credibility of the church when it preaches God's love for the lost depends on whether the church itself goes out to people in their lostness, identifies itself with them, and in a priestly way makes their predicaments its own". (*quoted in The Ministers Prayer Book p.263*).

The Church is important because Jesus wanted a visible, physical, bodily, active expression of God on earth for all time. And that is why the unity of the Church is important. For the Church to be divided into parts that vie with each other or that seek to undermine and destroy each other means that Christ is seen to have a fractured body, incapable of expressing the mind and heart of God. That is why Paul continued to develop his teaching about the Body of Christ by stressing the importance of every different part of the body. He writes about this in that very striking passage to the Corinthians, chapter 12. "Many different gifts but the one Spirit" – let the body function as a unity. We all have a place. One Anglican church in

the town where I live has a notice board by its front gate telling passers-by about its name and times of services and then adds this information:

“Vicar – the Rev so and so”

“Ministers – The Congregation”! Yes, we are all part of the body.

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The Church is, first of all, “the household of faith” – people who believe.

The Church is, secondly, “the body of Christ”.

Thirdly, the Church is “The Community of the Holy Spirit”.

We don't find this actual phrase in the New Testament, but it is a very New Testament idea. At our Wednesday lunchtime services we are currently working through part of the Acts of the Apostles, under the general title: “God's People in the Spirit”. It is sometimes said that this book of the bible would be more aptly named: “The Acts of the Holy Spirit”.

Of course, the Spirit of God has been at work since the beginning of time: The first book of the bible tells us that “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.....and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters”.

At various moments in the story of the Old Testament we learn about certain individuals being touched and empowered by the Spirit.

But, coming to the story of Jesus we find something very special about the Spirit.

When Jesus was preparing His disciples for the time when He wouldn't be with them any longer He promised them a gift, the gift of the Holy Spirit. He made that promise when He was having some special conversations with His disciples not long before His crucifixion. They were together when He made that promise.

On the last occasion when He met His disciples, the story recounted in the first chapter of Acts, Jesus instructs His disciples to wait in Jerusalem and they will soon receive the gift of His Spirit.

When that promise was fulfilled, on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were – again – together.

And whilst the Holy Spirit came and rested on individuals this was a very special gift to the Christian community – more than that, it was the very gift that “made” the Christian community, the life and energy that created the Church.

This is the thing that marks the Church of Jesus Christ out as different from every other institution or organisation that exists. It is the community that has been formed by the power of the Holy Spirit. And it is the community through which the Holy Spirit moves and works.

The Acts of the Apostles tell us something of the story of the early Church, the story of what happened after the Spirit had blown through that upper room on the Day of Pentecost. Amazing things happened.

-Fearful disciples became bold.

-Many ordinary people were touched by the preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus and wanted to know how they could respond.

-Sick people were healed.

-people in shackles found release.

-a community was created where people shared what they owned so that no one went short of anything they needed.

-churches were born in many parts of the Roman Empire.

And all because the Holy Spirit was at work through the life of this growing community called the Church.

The Church *is* the Community of the Holy Spirit.

And there are moments when it seems as if we can almost reach out and touch the Holy Spirit; His presence is so real.

-There are moments of quietness when small groups meet together for prayer and bible study when we sense His presence as we grasp a new truth or are strongly united in our prayers for a certain person or a certain issue.

-There are moments in our times of worship, sometimes in our Healing Services on Sunday evenings when the coming together of God's people, the depth of need, the intensity of expectancy, the prayer and the silence result in a sense that The Holy Spirit has been amongst us.

-There are moments when we meet together to "do the business of the church", and find ourselves struggling with some difficult problem – we pray, we speak, we listen – and when we come to go home at the end of the meeting we discover that God has blessed us with a guidance and direction that we hardly dared to expect.

-There are moments when we find ourselves especially sensitive to a particular human need and feel we should do something about it, as a Church, and as we wait quietly before God and offer to Him our concern and our desire to do something, we find ourselves prompted to take a particular action and then find, amongst us, people with the necessary gifts to get the job done.

We sometimes sing:

"All over the world the Spirit is moving" and that is true.

But the Church is that group of men and women, disciples of Jesus, who have committed themselves to Him and who form a community where the Holy Spirit can move in a very special way, because we have made ourselves open to Him.

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I realise that all I have said tonight is said in the context of a society where the Church is hardly noticed by many people, where many think it's message is irrelevant or even subversive and where many regard its members as being hypocrites and bigots.

So let me leave you with some challenging words, spoken some years ago by Leslie Newbigin, a Church of Scotland missionary to India – who became a bishop in the Church of South India and who was a highly respected teacher and theologian in India and in Britain, and a very saintly man.

"I have been forced to recognise that the most difficult frontier in the contemporary world is the one of which the churches have been, on the whole, so little conscious, a frontier that divides the world of biblical faith from the world whose values and beliefs are fed ceaselessly into every home on the television screen. England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church".

That's why God specifically needs the Church here and now, in our society.

To be the household of faith, people known for what they believe and in whom they have put their trust.

To be the Body of Christ, expressing something of God's heart in the world.

To be the Community of the Holy Spirit – the place where He can move in freedom and power.

It's your calling – and mine!

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