
Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:
“The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;
the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’
Matthew 21:42

What does it mean to ‘be church’? In what way might we answer this question?

When it comes to ‘church’ many people instantly think of a ‘church building’. Of course, we know that ‘church’ is not about buildings. And so we might reflect on *the people* who gather within the building – not only in terms of ‘worship’, but the people themselves. Others might also speak of ‘what’ the people ‘do’ – which is to gather ‘in worship of God’. Of course, we may also think of ‘church’ in terms of certain ‘congregations’ and ‘denominations’ to which a person belongs. And for many, true ‘church’ is seen in terms of what people do in terms of ‘social justice’ or ‘environmental action’ or whatever it is they *think* a ‘church’ must ‘do’.

Is ‘church’ simply about something you ‘do’ on a Sunday? Some might say ‘no’. Other may say ‘church’ is about what you ‘do’ in ‘every-day life’. But we may also ask, in what way does this need to be ‘seen’ in terms of gathering together on every Sunday in worship?

This year we are celebrating something that points to the formation of what is now known by many people as ‘the Lutheran Church’ – Martin Luther producing his 95 Theses. Indeed, it’s not too often we get to live through a 500th Anniversary. (Hence the decorations in our church).

Whilst it didn’t start out this way, the whole ‘Reformation’ process lead to people essentially asking what it means to ‘be church’.

One of the important documents in tis regard for us is ‘The Augsburg Confession’ – a document produced nearly 13 years *after* Martin Luther’s 95 Theses (and some here will also have an opportunity to live through another 500th Anniversary event!). In many ways, The Augsburg Confession is the definitive document that describes what Lutherans believe (hence it’s prominence within the Book of Concord – just after the Creeds).

The Augsburg Confession has a 2 sections to it, the first having to do with what are seen as ‘cornerstone teachings’ of the faith.

The First Article has to do with the Triune nature of God: God is ‘Three-in-One’. This is a key truth within Christianity, and the moment anyone departs from calling God ‘Lord’, and knowing God as ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ (Three distinct ‘persons’ in one God), then we would say a person is no longer Christian. Then follows are the teachings on sin, and Christ as Son of God.

Whilst there is strong agreement among Christians about this, there is also much disagreement about 'how' all this works (and this stands at the heart of differences between denominations).

And then a key teaching (especially as we approach the 500th Anniversary of 'The Reformation') has to do with what is known as 'the doctrine of justification' – in other words, what we believe about how we are 'made right' with God. In many ways we all 'know' this 'article of faith'. But perhaps we are not so familiar with what follows.

Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession states: *That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake.*

The next Article (6) has to do with how 'good works' will automatically flow from 'faith (indeed, that 'church' will be a truly 'living thing'). And then Article 7 speaks about the nature of 'church': *Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.*

And Article 8 states: *Although the Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers, nevertheless, since in this life many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled therewith, it is lawful to use Sacraments administered by evil men, according to the saying of Christ: The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat, etc. Matt. 23:2. Both the Sacraments and Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ, notwithstanding they be administered by evil men.*

What this really means is that it is God who truly 'builds' 'the church'. 'The Church' is a 'spiritual reality'. And even if a pastor or priest has 'fallen from the faith' (or done some truly terrible things), in spite of that person (not that it's OK for them to do bad things)...

...In spite of that person, God Himself acts through His 'means of Grace'. (cf. Article 14 on only those who are 'ordained' by 'the church' should preach and teach).

Critical for us in understanding 'church' is recognising the presence of the Triune God, our sin, Christ as Saviour, and that the Holy Spirit works 'outside us' to bring a living relationship with God 'within us'.

And so, when we come to our Gospel this day, Jesus is speaking about the true 'foundation' of 'the church'. Many of the religious teachers in Jesus' time were so worried about 'external actions' (not that they are necessarily unimportant) – but did not want to reflect on the true nature of their 'hearts'.

Again (as per last week) there is an important 'background to this Parable that we do not get with our Reading this day (or of the past few weeks). Jesus told this Parable during Holy Week. Jesus was only a few days away from suffering on the cross. And He knew what was ahead for Him.

There is so much we could focus upon in this Parable, but there are two things we may focus upon today. There are many elements to this Parable (which has strong allusions to Isaiah 5:1-7: God's Word about the destruction of Israel, His 'vineyard).

As we look at this story which Jesus told there are many dramatic elements, one being where Jesus says the tenants said of the landowner's son, "Come, let us kill him that we may gain the inheritance" (Matt.21:38). And so Jesus asked the question: "When the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" (Matt.21:40). And it is fascinating that the religious leaders answered, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death." This is important, and we will get to two aspects of this in a moment...

But the other fascinating thing here is how direct Jesus is. Matthew 21:45-46 says, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they realised that He was speaking about them."

The classic understanding of this parable is that Jesus is telling the leaders of Israel that they have failed in their recognition of firstly the prophets and now the Messiah. They have responded to the challenges that these people of God have brought to them, not by changing their ways. And Matthew, in particular, stresses that now God's vineyard will pass to another people. But there is a challenge here for us as well...

When you stop and think about it, we are tenants, not owners. It's clear from the very first pages of the Bible when God gave Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden, that they didn't own it, they were tenants. You are made and owned by God. And God gives us life in the hope of finding a harvest of fruit. What is fruitfulness? The word *fruit*, or a variation of it, is used 55 times in the New Testament and refers to a variety of results. Each one of the following is considered by God to be fruit: repentance (Matt. 3:8; Luke 13:5-9), practicing the truth (Matt. 7:16-21; Col. 1:10), prayer (John 15:7-8), an offering of money (Rom. 15:28), Christlike character, winning unbelievers to Christ (Rom. 1:13).

There is something really, really fascinating in this Parable that is important to us – it is the Son who died. In Matthew 21:44 we hear: "The one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls". This verse can be understood in two ways, and it has to do with 'broken' or 'crushed'. It is true that Jesus spoke these words against those who would reject Him. The religious leaders in Jesus' time would stumble and fall on the person and work of Jesus Christ. But we do as well. The question is, are you broken or crushed? Are you 'broken' by your sin', and open to God's goodness? Or are you 'crushed' and see no 'way out'?

Jesus told a story about a man who owned some land and rented it out to others. More than once they were given an opportunity to respond to this goodness. In this Parable we have a story of second chances (and more). And the simple question for us is, “What shall we do in relation to the Son?”

What does it mean to ‘be church’? At one level we may look at what we ‘do’. And as we ‘do this’, we also ought to see our true sinful nature – and our ultimate ‘helplessness’ without God. But the ‘real fruit is that God sent His Son who was crucified – but who did not stay dead. Jesus is alive. And we can come to Him again and again. He is indeed the ‘firstfruit of those who have died’. He is our Life, our Rock, our ‘cornerstone’.

As we fall upon the Rock who is Christ our Lord – and see the ‘brokenness of our sin – we stand on the solid Rock who is the Cornerstone of true and everlasting life. What a wonderful ‘foundation of ‘church’ we have in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!