

What kind of Church is this? (Eph. 2: 11-22 and Jer. 23: 1 -6. NS Reflection 19/7/15)

It was brave of Rev. Forrester to choose for today's reflection the question, *What kind of church is this?* For increasingly it is expressed in a negative tone, about church in general or specific. Even people who don't go to church presume to have an innate ability to say what a church should be, without reference to any New Testament benchmarks. However, it clearly is a question *all churches* must ask *ourselves* every so often. Evidently Christ does, and in Revelation 2 and 3 we find that 70% of those 7 Churches he examined no longer met His required standards.

Please pray with me as we begin our reflection. í Amen.

Early in the last century, a comedian who dubbed himself "The Vicar of Mirthon" came up with the line, "We are all here on earth to *help others*; what on earth the *others* are here for, I don't know!" The joke caught on, it is said, because that was the way in which many clergy then thought about their moral obligations. Of course pastors of that day would not have been the first to have feelings of that kind, and I am sure were not the last. Elijah famously felt as though he was the only righteous one left in Israel! The poet Auden used the Vicar of Mirthon's joke in another piece called, "the *conceit* of the social worker". But let's admit it, it is not only pastors and prophets, or social workers, who get those feelings of being the only faithful ones left, the only ones doing the Lord's work!

However, the Vicar of Mirthon's line does raise serious points for us to contemplate if we are going to try to answer with integrity the question, *What kind of church is this?* And if we truly love Christ and the Church, *and* those people who are not yet committed to either, it behoves us to *only* answer that question *very seriously and carefully*. The *unsaved* do not need us in the church to rush to join the naysayers, throwing out popular one word descriptions, many of which are not based on any Biblical marks of a church. But even the sceptics all know from somewhere that a church is supposed to *help others*. Such is the impact the life and precepts of Jesus have had on the world; even those who reject the Divine, admire His sacrificial care for the suffering and marginalised. Therefore, it *is* essential that the church contemplate what on earth we are here for, and how we actually help others, *as well as* whether we suffer from the conceit and the *type* of "separateness" implicit in the joke. *For*, as St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians will help us see, those were crucial considerations when Christ established His church.

One of the challenges for the church in answering that question as *posed by today's world* is that the questioners want simple answers, and look at issues as practically one dimensional, and from their own perspective.

If you ever read comments on any of the online media, you know that it is *certainly* a popular type of questioning in *Cayman*. However, life and purpose for the Church can never be quite so one dimensional, and there must be a very distinct, and Divine, starting point for *our* perspective. Increasingly, that starting point might not be the same as for our questioners, who often disparage the Ultimate, Everlasting and Empowering Help we offer ó and everone needs. But thank God at least ðthe churchø is still seen as something that *should* be helping others. It is said that the manner in which the early church cared for one another ó and for that Biblical ðneighbourö - was one of the major marks that caught peopleø's attention and got them interested in learning, then believing, the Good News. Given Christø's caring concern, I do not think any of us would disagree that it still has to be part of the answer to the question, ðWhat kind of church is this?ö

That is a question that St. Paul certainly examined at great length and from different angles in respect of the early church as a whole, as well as in the individual congregations that he started or shared responsibility for. In the Book of Acts as well as his various Epistles we see him honing away to try to help get the church to be the church God truly wanted it to be, and to continuously correct any drifting away from that direction by any of those congregations. In this respect we must never overlook the magnitude of the correction that God had to make in Paulø's life and the course on which he had passionately embarked before Christ miraculously revealed how wrongly he had perceived the truth of Godø's righteousness. A righteousness that is matched by and inseparable from Godø's love, a love that is pure grace. Once the eyes of his heart had been opened to that profound truth, we see Paul steadfastly admonishing the churches and tearing apart the heresies of anyone who tried to lead them back to any of the old ways that were inconsistent with the grace of God revealed in the unconditional and sacrificial love of Christ. He profoundly had no place for any traditions or popular thinking or conceptions or manmade rules that would make his old compatriots feel good or make opponents more tolerant toward the church, if they would be stumbling blocks to those not yet in the church, not yet surrendered and committed to Christ.

And therein must remain the *difference* of the church in a hostile world that wants us to be the kind of church that fits the individualø's personal desire at any given time, raining down fire one minute and all forgiving lovey dovey the next. But Paul was clear in *his* understanding that the Church was answerable *only* to the One Who would say, Take the plank out of your own eye, *then* you can help your brother get the speck out of his; Who would call the self-perceived perfect fundamentalists ðstumbling blocksö, while calling sinners of all kinds to become perfect like the Father in Heaven; Who would say to each of us, I do

not condemn you, [but] go and *sin no more*; He Who would leave the 99 and go and bring back the *one*.

He Who not only echoed the anguished pleas of God through Jeremiah and Ezekiel to, Turn from your wicked ways and *live*, but Who also made that particularly possible.

We have often heard it said about various actions and statements of Jesus that He turned the world, the accepted conceptions and practices, upside down. In reality, however, Jesus really turned things *right-side up*; *people* had turned the world, and God's plan for it, *upside down* - and we continue to do so by *resisting God's intentions and precepts*, or, in a word, *sinning*. In our text this morning from Ephesians we find St. Paul very animated as he expounds on one profound aspect of this to the churches in and around Greece and Turkey, that is, churches made up mainly of *non-Gentiles* rather than the Jews of the churches that had started in Jerusalem. In the first 10 verses of Ephesians 2, he had addressed the wonder of the *individual believer*, whether Jew or Gentile, having been made *alive in Christ*, raised from the dead of sin through Christ's resurrection, "*when you believed*", as he said in verse 8 (NLT). And verse 10, which ended that section, certainly supports the understanding that we are here to *help others*. There is his illuminating theology that doing good things cannot *bring us* salvation - *but* once we are truly *saved*, we become God's *masterpiece*, created in Christ *to do the "good works"* God has prepared for us to do.

In *today's text*, St. Paul also helps us understand the seriousness of the *second* aspect of the Vicar of Mirrors' joke, the divisive concept of *the others*. Here Paul is speaking mainly on the wonder of *the church*, the collective body of those who have put their faith in Christ as God Incarnate and as their personal Saviour and Lord. He emphasises particularly the former position of his Gentile members, who, he said, had had *no hope in God*. For they believed in all kinds of *non-gods* and did not recognise the one true God, unlike the Jews who had been called into that particular covenant relation with Jehovah. This is not to say that he was suggesting the Jews had been automatically saved by that relationship. To the contrary, he had already addressed how the Jewish members had only received salvation *when they put their faith in Christ*. But both the Jews and Gentiles in the congregation would have been profoundly interested in what Paul was saying, because the division between the two had been stark. We do not have time to go into the details, but Paul's choice of the words *temple* and *wall of hostility*, for example, would have reminded both of them of how the gentiles were separated and confined to the outermost court of the Jewish temple. There, under threat of death and all kinds of nasty reminders posted on the walls, they were never allowed to even get anywhere near the inner court representing the Presence of God.

It seems the Jews long overlooked that part of God's promise to Abraham that *“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you”* (Gen 12:3, etc.), *not* just his blood descendants. Paul addressed this in Gal 3: 7, 8, 29, for example, but some scholars say that while the Jews knew that promise extended to gentiles, they never expected that it meant they would actually *unite* with the Gentiles in one body of believers – that is, in this new creation, *the church*.

Now Paul was explaining how, through and under Christ, God had brought the two of them together, abolishing the distinction. In verse 16 we read, using the NLT, *“Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of His death on the Cross, and our hostility to each other was put to death.”* Reconciled to God and reconciled to each other, through Christ, and *only through Christ*. Paul emphasises throughout Ephesians that God has reconciled *everything* in the world through Christ. He notes the discord rife throughout all facets of the world, even, as he said about himself so vividly in Romans, within our individual selves, where good and bad are always warring. But in Chapter 1 he concluded that *“God has put all things under the authority of Christ.”* That is where he sees everything being put back *right side up*, with the individual human coming back from that warring soul into the kind of person God had made us to be, before we sneaked a taste of the knowledge of evil.

So, in today's text Paul is stressing the *unity*, the *oneness*, of the church, under that reconciling power and authority of Christ, regardless of who the individual people are who make up that body, even if they had previously disparaged one another. Such individuals could not live as one on their own, but *Christ* has made it possible. In fact, if we have been reconciled to *God* through Christ on the Cross, then we *must* be reconciled *also to one another* and the walls of hostility torn down. *Unity within the church*, was something that Paul was as passionate about in his letters as he was about condemning other heresies. Here we read him saying that *“[Christ] Himself is our peace”*, or as he put it explicitly to the Colossian church, *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”* And it was not just ethnic division that had been abolished, *but Paul stressed all other divisions too*. In Gal 3 he says that amongst those who have been *“baptised into Christ”* *“there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* Thus there is no room in all this for any *conceit*. God precisely would not provide room for us to assume a boastful attitude. Through Christ, *God* both provided good works for us *all* to do *and* abolished the walls separating people by ethnicity, nationality, economic standing or gender.

As Paul continued into Ephesians 3 and 4, there is no getting away from the fact that unity is an essential and defining mark that distinguishes the church, the body of Christ, from some other group who may offer help to others but whose roots have not *grown down into God's love*. That defining unity will also only be present if each member, each part of the body, *does its own special work & help[ing] the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love*. Likewise, any attempt to promote an image of unity will also fail the definition of a church if the membership does not demonstrate the trust in Christ that enables Him to fill our hearts and the Holy Spirit to empower us. Or if we do not *come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standards of Christ*. (4: 13 NLT)

Yes - Paul expected a lot of the Church. For he understood the expectations of *Christ* that only the *new person*, *born again* from the Spiritual womb, could make up that body. And he expected a lot because he understood the tremendous privilege and responsibility to which Christ had called that body. William Barclay sums up what Paul has revealed to us in Ephesians as, *First, Christ is God's instrument of reconciliation [for the world]. Second, the Church is Christ's instrument of reconciliation [for the world].*

As a result, Paul did not only call for the church, corporately, to live up to those high *standards of Christ*. But he also emphasised that a person who purports to follow Christ must carry on that *living as Children of Light* and *living by the Spirit's power in their individual daily lives*, mutually respecting and upholding one another in their relations as husband and wife, child and parent, employer and employee, equipped and protected by constant prayer, *God's word and righteous living*.

There is one other aspect we should take note of. Not something he wrote, but the wonder and excitement and thankfulness that never seemed to grow dim in Paul as he contemplated what God in Christ had done for us and called us to do. Though he was writing this letter from prison, *in chains*, he said, not even *that* could diminish his enthusiasm and urgency to get others to properly understand what Christ had done for them - and wants for everyone else!

Will you be able to point to that kind of enthusiasm for providing the good news and good works for others, to the faith, unity and empowering relationships and all those other marks of a healthy church when Christ asks you, *What kind of Church is this?* In other words, will you be able to conclude like our Scripture passage today? That *this church* is one in which we *are being built together in Christ to become a dwelling place in which God lives by His Spirit*.

Amen.