

The Bible and Community – 1 A Community of God

I want to begin by reading from the introductions to a couple of books. The first is the excellent little book, *The Gift of Church* by Jim Samra.

An email from a woman

She had visited every church within a fifty mile radius of her home. Unable to find one which was suitable, she wrote to me because she was listening to podcasts of my sermons. In her email she asked "is listening to sermons at home alone enough, or do I still need to go to church?"

A couple with three young children....

All this activity doesn't leave much time or energy to be involved in a local church... A weekly bible study in their home... is all they and their children need. Are they right?

A successful businessman...

He is sure that if he ran his business the way most churches are run he would be bankrupt within a few weeks. Consequently he has little time or respect for the church. He and some likeminded businessmen...get together for accountability and encouragement. For him this group is his "church." Is there any reason for him to become involved in a local church?¹

Then there is the quote from the much more demanding book, *After our Likeness*, by Miroslav Volf. (I have copied it on to your handout.) Volf grew up as the son of a pastor in communist Yugoslavia, under Tito.

It would not quite accurate to say that my parents worked for the church, they lived for that small community of believers entrusted to their care.... our home was in the church and the church had insinuated itself into our home. We were part of it because it became part of us...

What remains indelibly inscribed, not so much in my memory as in my very soul is the deep and unwavering commitment - love, I think is the right word - that my parents had for that community.

Now as I look back from a distance I see what I failed to recognise clearly at the time but what nevertheless shaped me profoundly: their commitments mirrored the commitment of Christ, who "loved the church and gave himself up for her" Eph 5:25.²

For the last nine months at least one of the recurring themes in elders' meetings has been the biblical teaching about the church. We have wrestled with it as we have considered possible future church plants, how to manage Messy Church, what homegroups are for, how to deal with pastoral issues and much more.

¹ James Samra, *The gift of church : how God designed the local church to meet our needs as Christians* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Zondervan, 2010).

² Miroslav Volf, *After our likeness : the church as the image of the trinity* (Grand Rapids Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), ix-x.

But one of the things that we kept coming back to was a conviction that in our culture, and amongst us in particular, our understanding of the biblical vision of the church is not uniformly strong. The people Jim Samra describes are utterly familiar, whilst Miroslav Volf's church is as foreign to us as a bird of paradise in the arctic.

So we decided that I should teach a series on the church. Now we could have gone through all the New Testament passages on the church and built up a picture of what it should be like, but as I meditated on this I became convinced that there is something more fundamental that I need to show you. Over the next few weeks I want to try to show you that local churches are a vital, pivotal, integral part of God's whole plan for his whole creation. They are central to the whole story of the Bible. If you wanted one statement from Jesus about why he died on the cross you could not do better than his statement "I will build my church."

So, over these next few weeks we are going to try to plot the whole story of the bible, following one major theme – what I have called "the communal vision of the bible."

But before we begin our journey we must stop and recognise for a moment that there are significant challenges for churches in 21st century Britain.

☞ *Challenges to churches in 21st C Britain*

I don't particularly mean outright opposition though that continues to grow.

I have in mind a range of other factors. For instance our geographical mobility

○ *Mobility*

We move around a lot. The median period of church attendance here is about 4 years. Newcomers here will stay an average of 3 years. Nationally the proportion of people who have been in their home for less than a year is 10%, but amongst us it is closer to 20%, and in the innermost parts of East Oxford it probably rises to about 50%. So people have short term superficial relationships. Their best friends are probably elsewhere, and their families almost certainly are. Deep commitment to others is difficult in such an environment.

However I am not sure it is such a big issue. The early church grew and spread partly because the Roman empire in the first century was one of the most geographically mobile cultures in history.

A more significant factor is the breakdown in families and the wider community which is happening at the moment. Soon the majority of children in this country will not complete their schooling with both biological parents in the home. That has a significant emotional effect which overflows into wider relationships. It is a factor which affects many of us here.

Alongside that there is a decline in social cohesion due to mobility, family breakdown, and also our increasing multiculturalism. David Cameron is absolutely right that the ghettoising of different cultures has been bad for us. What is less clear is whether he can do anything about it. Undoubtedly, though, the habit that we have now of living in a sea of different cultures but never relating beyond our little nuclear group is played out in churches.

I go to Tesco's on the Cowley Road and I am bowled over by the variety of people there. And I think how many of these would our church be committed to integrating into their life together? How many of us have significant relationships with others in this church who are not part of our natural social circle?

According to the Bible relating only to people I like is not a lifestyle choice – it's a sin.

But more significant still is what many people call our "postmodern ethos" today. Today relationships are all about surface. The new media have contributed to that – I love Facebook, but a Facebook relationship is very different to the real thing. We see only what the other person wants us to see, we related in pictures and sound-bites. And we can unfriend them at the click of a button.

We are trained to view ourselves as consumers, not persons. Think of the humble British pub for instance. Once it was enough for the pub to be "the local." Because people went there in part to relate to other local people. Today our church building stands equidistant between two thriving pubs, one of which now has a "Bib Gourmand" in the Michelin Guide 2011, and the other has successfully created a

clever Oxford brand – the Rusty Bicycle. Locals die if they are just “for local people.” We are not people, we are fickle consumers.

People have learned to live in our constantly shifting world, and learned in part to enjoy the choice and freedom which goes with it. But there is a deep loss. In the process we lose deep community. And what I want us to see this morning as we begin this series on the church – is that we actually become sub-human.

Because human beings were made in the image of God, and amazingly God in his essence is relational.

Relationships image God

I want us to look at an amazing couple of verses in Genesis 1 and then glance forward at the whole of the rest of the Bible by way of introduction this morning.



Genesis 1:26-27

The first thing I want you to notice is the plural “let *us* make man in our image.” Are there many gods? That is absolutely contrary to the rest of the bible, and even the rest of Genesis 1 – God alone makes creates.

Some Jewish scholars have suggested that he is addressing the angels. But even this does not work since even angels are not involved in creation according to the rest of the Bible – they simply look on in wonder.

Not surprisingly since the earliest days of the church Christians have wondered whether this is a first hint of the trinity. Father, Son and Spirit cooperating in the work of creation.

Of course a full doctrine of the trinity is a long way from this text. In fact it is probably better to see this as a kind of internal deliberation in the mind of God – as if he speaking to himself. But even this indicates something really important about God. Somehow there is distinction within the godhead – God can speak to God.

That becomes even more significant when we see that a vital aspect of the way that we image God is what biologists call our sexual dimorphism.



1:27

Somehow the image of God is not completed in a single gender. The image of God can only be fully expressed in a relationship between two different persons.

As the bible story unfolds the central way in which that idea is developed is in marriage. So in Genesis 2:24 we see marriage being described as “the two become one.”

But the New Testament interestingly relativises marriage. Marriage is not the primary place where the image of God is completed in relationship – the church is.

There is a fascinating little statement in Ephesians 2:15 which illustrates this. Paul is describing the way in which the church brings together all kinds of people who would be naturally hostile to each other.



Ephesians 1:14-16

What I want you to notice that is that this is described as the creation of “one new man out of the two”. That is it is like a marriage. But now between lots of people who are “in Christ.”

So this is what I want you to see this morning. It is in pursuing diverse relationships amongst God’s people – learning to live and work together, learning to love across boundaries – that we become fully human, that we are conformed together to the image of God.

Hold that thought while we glance forward then, at the whole of the rest of the bible. The whole story of the bible is actually a tale of two cities.

☞ A tale of two cities

A tale of two kinds of community. Genesis describes how Adam and Eve sinned, and a significant dimension of the consequence of that was their alienation from one another. They donned clothes to symbolise this. They blamed one another for their plight. Their son Cain murdered his brother Abel. And Cain’s isolation as a result was terrifying to him.

Genesis 4:14 (NIV - Anglicised)

¹⁴ I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me.”

And Cain responded to this social alienation in a very interesting way.

Genesis 4:17 (NIV - Anglicised)

¹⁷ Cain was then building a city, and he named it after his son Enoch.

He builds a city of man. Straight away we can see the incipient pride, and self-aggrandisement in it – he named it after his son. But that is just the beginning of a long story. In Genesis 11 the tower of Babel is built “to make a name for ourselves.” And Babel became the city of Babylon, which became proverbial in the Bible for a community of power luxury and despotism, brutally oppressing God’s people.

In the New Testament Rome is called Babylon, and in the book of Revelation her destruction, and by extension the destruction of all great human cultures is described in graphic and terrible detail.

The book of Revelation exposes what underlies such cultures. They are built on violence, oppression and the obsessive desire for more. Familiar criticisms of our culture – as we go to war to protect our interests, rely on a constantly growing economy despite global warming etc etc. And significantly for our study this morning this “city of man” is described as a prostitute. A horrible yet seductively attractive perversion of a true relationship.

Alongside this story in the Bible is the story of a true community, the city of God. God forms a new community – Israel, and a new city – Jerusalem. Israel and Jerusalem fail, but God is not finished. Jesus comes to recreate Israel, and Jerusalem, but this time not in one place or amongst one people – but in every land, and every people – he creates churches.

The only thing left for him to do after that is to create one eternal immeasurable unblemished community which is Revelation 21 is described as “the new Jerusalem”.

That is where we are going over the next few weeks. But for today I want you to see how central in God’s purposes ordinary, mixed, scruffy, dysfunctional, troubled, unprepossessing little communities like this one are. It is as you relate to the variety of people here that you become truly human – that you image God.

In just a moment we will break for coffee. Will you seek out your friends only, or all those who are in Christ? The answer to that question determines whether or not God sees you as truly his child, in his image.