

# Finding Focus

*- being Jesus-people in a cynical and turbulent world*

## TURBULENT TIMES

### The perfect storm

The story of 'Jesus stilling the storm' seems to set the scene for thinking about being a Christ community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

'On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him. "Teacher do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea "Peace be still!" Then the wind ceased and there was a dead calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mark 4:35-41)

Imagine ourselves as actually being there, sharing in the experience with the disciples and Jesus. The disciples in the boat represent 'community' - 'we are all in the same boat'. The disciples in the boat also represent being 'church'; they are following Jesus as - 'the called out ones'.

This is the boat in which we are journeying and voyaging in together throughout this weekend. The image of a boat, as a symbol of the Christian community of faith, has been one of many images used by followers of Jesus since the very earliest days. It of course has as a parallel in the image of the 'ark' (from the Genesis 'flood' story) - a righteous community (family) together with wild creation, experiencing God's salvation in the midst of flood and tempest.

There is panic within the boat echoing the chaos of the storm-wind and tumultuous waters outside. Jesus stands and faces the tumult; his authoritative command of "Peace!" not only stills the elements but is also, of course, the central core of his message of the kingdom and proclamation of the good news of the gospel. This is the foundation upon which the community of faith that follows Jesus is to be built, within this turbulent world.

Being Jesus-people, being 'church' - today, is like a boat in a storm, with many points of reference being obscured, instability within and without. Reflect on those things that you believe make up that 'storm' personally, socially and culturally

#### **Exercise:**

- Identify the things that you believe make up the 'storm', both personally and in society, which influence and challenge the experience of being a Jesus-community or church.
- What would you say to Jesus as you are waking him from sleep in the boat?



## COMMUNITY AND GOSPEL

### Asking the questions

The concepts of both - 'community' and 'church' – have become very tired words; they have been diminished, devalued, marginalised and on occasions they are almost mythical - so vague at times as to be almost meaningless.

The serious question is, "Do we abandon them for something else?" Many wish to do so and numbers have and are trying to; but these words speak to ideas that are deeply significant. Both the words 'community' and 'church' point towards something that is aspirational, but have become mired by experience or tarnished by disappointment.<sup>1</sup>

Attempts not to use these words have never proved hugely satisfactory because they point to a reality greater than the words. This being so should we be working to rediscover the words 'community' and 'church' and re-shape, re-mint and re-forge them? Many are also trying to do just this.

### What is community?

#### **Exercise:**

- What do you understand by the word 'community'?

There are literally hundreds of definitions of community, here are a few to consider:

"A group of interacting organisms sharing an environment"<sup>2</sup>

"A group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it"<sup>3</sup>

"A group of people linked by a communications structure supporting discussion and collective action"<sup>4</sup>

"Community is the process of becoming united around the common experience of a core vision"<sup>5</sup>

Our understanding of community must surely transcend merely a human perspective and include the whole of creation? As in our first definition and in the Lakota Sioux Native American blessing:

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to see how in popular conversations the word 'church' can be seen as a 'bad' word, besmirched by disappointment and experience, while the word 'community' is seen as a 'good' word, something to aspire to but not as yet achieved!

<sup>2</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community> with reference to a biological definition of 'community'

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bellah, *'Habits of the Heart'*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 333

<sup>4</sup> C. Farrington and E Pine, *"Community Memory: A Case Study in Community Communication"* Reinventing Technology, Rediscovering Community. Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 220

<sup>5</sup> See Jean Vanier *'Community and Growth'* Darton Longman & Todd 1989 cf p 1-12



*Mitakuye oyasín*  
“For all my relations”<sup>6</sup>

What are these definitions saying? What are they speaking to about the human psyche? What is their significance in being part of the creation community, humanity and a faith community?

**“What is a Christ-community?”**

**Exercise:**

- Share one experience of being part of what you would describe as being a Christ-community
- What qualities and characteristics would you lead you to describe it in this way?

This is a very important question to engage with to help to shape the unfolding of our theme.

**What is the gospel?**

In fact to start to form an answer to our question, “What is a Christ-community?” We need to begin by asking a prior question, “What is the gospel?” A question that is most commonly dismissed as unnecessary by the Christian community because it is assumed everyone knows exactly what the answer is.

**Exercise:**

- What do you understand ‘the gospel’, the Christian ‘good news’, to be?

The word ‘gospel’ is an Anglo-Saxon word that is used in English to translate the Greek word *euaggelion* that means ‘good news’; it can have no other meaning other than ‘good news’. What is the content of this ‘good news’?

Paul speaks about the gospel as ‘the gospel of God’ (cf 1Th 2:2, 8-9) and ‘the gospel of Jesus Christ’ (cf 2 Cor 4:4; 9:13; 10:14). There are significant references to the ‘gospel of the kingdom’ (cf Mk 1:14-15). What does this mean that the message actually is?

However, in two important verses we hear the gospel spoken about as ‘the gospel of peace’:

‘You know the word that he sent to Israel,  
the gospel of peace by Jesus Christ;  
he is Lord of all.’  
(Acts 10:36)

‘Wearing as sandals on your feet  
the eagerness to spread  
the gospel of peace’  
(Eph 6:15)

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<sup>6</sup> See George Tinker ‘*For All My Relations*’ article in *Sojourner Magazine* 20<sup>th</sup> January 1991



Jesus is the one who comes ...

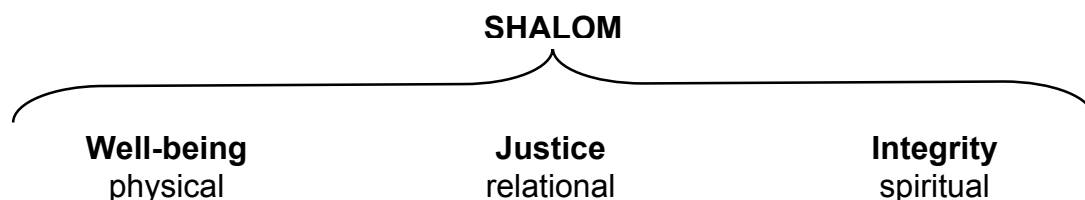
‘... preaching peace,  
peace to you who were far away,  
peace to those near at hand’  
(Eph 2:14-17 cf Isa 52:7)

‘... to guide our feet into the way of peace’  
(Luke 1:79)

Jesus' instructions to the disciples he sends out to the towns and villages in pairs ...

‘Whatever house you enter, let your first words be,  
“Peace to this house!”  
And if a person of peace lives there, your peace will go and rest on them’  
(Lk 10:5-6)

Almost without exception, when the word *euaggelion* (gospel) was used in the Greek and Roman world, it meant the proclamation of the coming of peace. Along with the texts quoted above it is quite clear that the gospel is the ‘gospel of peace’. The Greek word for ‘peace’ (*eirene*) used in the New Testament is simply translating the Hebrew word for ‘peace’, which is *shalom*. This word has very specific implications:



Any concept of ‘church’ must be the community expression of *shalom*, therefore every church must be a ‘peace church’, demonstrating the essential elements of *shalom*.

## DISCOVERING CHURCH

### What is church?

The English word ‘church’ is used to translate the Greek word *ekklesia*, but it is only one of some 96-plus images used throughout the New Testament to describe the ‘Jesus-community’.

Jesus said, "... upon this rock I will build my church and the  
powers of death shall not prevail against it."  
(Mt 16:18)

'Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God  
and what appeared was the church'  
(P. Batiffol)

When the New Testament speaks about *ekklesia*<sup>7</sup> it appears to focus on the epicenter of God's plan in history. As we have mentioned, to speak of it today is to touch on a subject

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<sup>7</sup> We have already noted how 'ekklesia' has become the most widely applied of the many biblical metaphors used to refer to the people of God. We find it 114 times in the New Testament:

- 62 - Paul's letters



filled with confusion, suspicion and conflict; responses, which have their roots in history, experience, understanding and expectation. To many the church is an anomaly, an irrelevance and a disappointment. To others it is a symbol or an experience of division and disagreement in both doctrine and practice.

To take a positive and creative step forward we have to grapple with this simple yet profound question, "What is church?"<sup>8</sup>

## Church is ... people

The Christian community has universally adopted the word 'church' as the name by which to be known. However, randomly asking any passer-by on the street what 'church' is, their universal reply will almost always be, "A building". Is this valid?

Interestingly, and confusingly, our English word 'church' is directly derived from the Greek word *Kuriakon* meaning 'the Lord's house', and refers to a 'building'. The Scottish *kirk*, the German *kirche* and the Dutch *kerk* all come from the same root as the English word 'church'; and each carry the idea of a building. However, neither the biblical idea, nor the Greek word *ekklesia* (translated 'church' in English versions of the New Testament) have anything whatever to do with the concept of a building.

The Biblical idea of *ekklesia* is 'a gathering of people assembled for a purpose'. This is reinforced by the fact that we know there were no buildings specifically set aside for Christian worship until well into the second century CE. So the frequently obscured truth is that 'the church can never be a building, it is always people!

## Church is ... radical

The word *ekklesia* is secular in meaning, provocative in the way the early Christians used it and already had already been used in the Jewish community in a significant way:

### ▪ Secular word

We know that in classical Greek the word *ekklesia* was used with the idea of a 'gathering' or 'assembly' since the 5th century BC. It was used to describe the calling together of all those who were full citizens of a Greek city-state for an assembly in which political and judicial decisions were taken. It was a secular political term, which had no religious significance whatever.

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- 03 - Matthew
  - 23 - Acts
  - 20 - Revelation
  - 06 - General letters

The fact that it is only found in one Gospel, and is absent from 2 Timothy and Titus, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 & 2 John and Jude is not at all significant when we remember it is only one of many pictures

<sup>8</sup> It has been traditional to approach the study of the church within the framework of the words of the Nicene Creed; 'the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic'. All this is true, but these ideas flow from the more fundamental biblical teaching of the calling of the church by the tri-unity of the godhead



So when the early Christians used the word *ekklesia* it had the sense of God in Christ calling people out of the world to gather to himself. They were 'citizens of heaven' (Ph 3:20; Hb 12:23) being heralded to fulfill God's purposes.

However, when the word *ekklesia* is used in the New Testament it must always be understood as including the phrase 'of God' after it. (cf. 1Cor 1:2; 2Cor. 1:1; Acts 20:28). Or even more completely 'of God in Christ' (Rm 16:16; Gal. 1:22; 1Th 2:14). It is 'to God' the people assemble and he assembles them. This essential addition, stated or implied, gives *ekklesia* its unique Christian sense in contrast to secular Greek usage. Without it the full significance of the Christian use of *ekklesia* is lost.

### ▪ **Provocative choice**

It is exciting to see the early Christians using this secular political term, free of any religious connotations. They choose to stand in sharp contrast to the myriad of religious groups within the ancient world. They were no mere 'Christ-cult' amongst others. They were the '*ekklesia* of God, in Christ' standing out against all the cults in the same way as they stood out against the whole world, even the so-called religious world. 'The church of God always stands in contrast, and even opposition to other forms of society'.

It was probably Jewish Christians from Greek speaking synagogues joining with Gentile Christians, in the earliest days of the church, who took up the word *ekklesia* to describe themselves.

The early Christians chose *ekklesia* not only because its political, non religious meaning made a radical declaration about their relationship to God and the world; but also because its use to translate Hebrew ideas into the Greek of the Septuagint (LXX) provided other important truths.

### ▪ **Hebrew roots**

There are two Hebrew words that describe the 'gathering together of a company of people'. Each carries a slightly different sense and the Septuagint uses a different Greek word in each case:

- Heb *edhah* / Gk *synagogue*: means 'people assembled by appointment'
- Heb *qahal* / Gk *ekklesia*: means 'to call together a company of people for purpose'

The Hebrew *qahal* stresses the idea of 'calling'; an assembly summoned for special occasions. It is often used with the sense of 'calling to covenant', that bond which united every member and tribe of Israel. The call was for the people to gather together to hear the word of God about some aspect of their covenant life.

Important examples of the use of *qahal* are:

- Assembling the people for covenant making Horeb (Dt 5:2)
- Summoning elders for council (cf. Gen 49:6)
- Mobilising the warriors for war (1Sam 17:47)
- Yahweh calling together the whole nation (Dt 4:10; Mic 2:5)
- Meeting to dedicate Solomon's Temple (1Kg 8:14-ff)
- Ezra reading the Law and renewing covenant in 444BC (Neh 8:1-ff)
- Calling an special national assembly (Jer 26:17, 44:15)



So *qahal* emphasizes that Israel has been called into being by the word of Yahweh to be the bearer of the divine covenant.

By the 1st century CE *ekklesia*, as a word for an assembly, had fallen into disuse within the Jewish community. The word *synagogue*, with a sense of restricted local gathering, had become the popular word for their meetings which had also stressed the participation of men alone.

When the first Christians read the word *ekklesia* in the Septuagint they found it had much greater significance for them than *synagogue*. *Ekklesia* had exciting implications; its content and context had vital new covenant dimensions, and apart from times of war and justice women and children were fully part. But this was just the beginning; 'the *ekklesia* of God in Christ' was to hold depths of truth beyond imagining.

### **Church is ... distinct and unique**

From the outset the Christian *ekklesia* was unique:

- Distinct from political councils by the addition of the words 'in God the Father'
- Distinct from the synagogue by the addition of the words 'in the Lord Jesus Christ'

The Christian *ekklesia* is always 'the Church of God', a divinely created entity. From the very beginning (Acts 2: 37-41) the church were those:

- Gathered in response to apostolic preaching
- Accepting Jesus as Messiah
- Expressing repentance in baptism
- Atoned by the blood of Jesus
- Experiencing the forgiveness of sins
- Receiving the Holy Spirit
- Knowing themselves to belong to God

This emphasis gave the distinctiveness to the New Testament concept of 'ekklesia'.

The Christian *ekklesia* is always 'the People of God', a historical and global unity, and not some local assembly:

- In natural continuity with historic Israel
- Heirs of all God's promises
- Having the 'spirit of the Messiah'
- The Messianic community
- The *ekklesia* of the firstborn

The church stands or falls on its sole foundation and its continuing in Jesus the Messiah and recognition of him as Lord, not on people or places.

### **Church is ... universal yet local**

The New Testament use of 'ekklesia' makes it abundantly clear that there can never be more than one Church:

- *Ekklesia* is used whether speaking of a local congregation (1Th 1:1) or the church universal (Gal 1:13)



- *Ekklesia* is used for a small house fellowship (Rm 16:5; Col 4:15; 1Cr 16:19)
- *Ekklesia* is used of the Hebrew Christian congregation in Jerusalem and the Gentile congregation in Antioch
- *Ekklesia* is used in the singular for the local church (Acts 11:26); it is used in the plural for a number of separate communities in distinct localities (Acts 15:41; 16:5; Gal 1:22); it is used in the singular for the whole church in the widest sense (Gal 1:13)
- *Ekklesia* is fully expressed in any particular geographical location, but at the same time its unity is unrestricted by geography. It is not 'the Corinthian church' it is 'the church in Corinth' (1Cor 1:2)
- *Ekklesia* is never used to speak of a group of congregations collectively as 'the church'; the New Testament has no concept of a denominational, provincial or national church

All those who belong to God belong to the church. The secular use of *ekklesia* emphasised 'quantity', while the *ekklesia* of God emphasises quality'. Size is of no account; the church is in being whenever and wherever God's own are gathered together. The whole church is present even if only two or three are gathered (Mt 18:20).

The church is an 'organic' not an 'arithmetic' unity. It is not the sum of the congregations, nor a federation of congregations. The 'Church' cannot be divided into 'churches', nor can 'churches' be added together to make 'the Church'. Christ is fully present in the whole and in the parts. Such is the mystery. It is for this reason there can never be more than one church. To be out of communion with other Christians is to be out of communion with Christ.

### **Church is ... heavenly and eschatological**

While the nature of the oneness of the church on earth is a thrilling concept and tantalising concept, it is but part of the mystery. Its heart is to be found in other New Testament passages.

There are references to the church in Paul's letters to the Colossians (1:18,24) and Ephesians (1:22; 3:10,21; 5:23-24,27,29,32), which are usually interpreted as speaking about 'the church universal to which all believers belong'. But in what way can the worldwide church assemble?

Both letters, however, address Christians in their present earthly situation but speak of them as already existing in the heavenly realm (Col 3:1,3), 'seated with Christ in heavenly places' (Eph 1:3; 2:5-6). Here Christians participate in the heavenly 'ekklesia', gathered around Christ, while they go about their mundane daily tasks.

These ideas, hinted at by Paul, are spelt out clearly by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in 12:22-24:

'You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem ... to myriads of angels ... to the church of the firstborn ... to God the judge of all ... to the spirits of righteous ones made perfect ... to Jesus the mediator of a covenant'.

In contrast to Sinai here is the final, the ultimate, encounter between God and his people. And to this point Christians 'have already come'; this is their present experience not just their future hope. Here are:





- 'Myriads of angels': servants of God, agents of his will
- 'Church of the firstborn': the whole communion of saints, those who have already died and those still living upon the earth
- 'Just ones made perfect': saints of all ages perfected by the work of Christ; Hebrew saints and believers of pre-Christian days

The reality is breathtaking. Here centre stage is God the judge and Jesus the mediator, surrounded by the whole company of heaven, angels and believers of every age perfected by Christ. This is church in its truest and fullest sense; it is a gathering currently taking place. It is heavenly, eschatological and now! Here we see the overlap and tension between the ages in an awesome way. Each local house group or congregation is an earthly manifestation of this heavenly assembly gathered around God and Christ.

### **Church is ... a messianic community**

The church is the 'first fruit' of the new humanity of Jesus Christ, the 'first fruits' of the new creation of the 'last days'. The church proclaims that 'indeed the new has come' (2Cor 5:17). There is 'neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, but all one in Christ' (Gal 3:28), 'one new person' (Eph 2:15) out of all races and classes. The Messianic community possesses 'newness of life' (Rm 6:4) and 'newness of Spirit' (Rm 7:6); both phrases are clear eschatological terms.

There is a wonderful asymmetry in the unfolding of the new creation against the backdrop of the original creation:

- In the original creation: the heavens and the earth created first - finally the people
- In the new creation: the renewed people are created first – finally the new heavens and earth

God's plan is to 'gather up all things in heaven and earth in Christ' (Eph 1:10). Christ is the 'new Adam' (the new person who is also the new corporate mankind). 'In Adam all died, in Christ shall all be made alive' (1Cor 15:22). In Christ the present trend of humanity is reversed. In the new Adam the church is taking on the image and likeness of God in which humanity was originally created (1Cor 15:49).

### **Church is ... completed humanity**

God's purpose in history is often spoken of in metaphors of ingathering and harvest. The church is those gathered and also the one's gathering. The church is not only the 'new humanity' but also the 'completed humanity', gathered 'into Christ'. It is not a fixed number but rather a 'perfect whole', a 'full complement'. The fullness, or completed number of the nations of the world and of Israel (Rm 11:25-26).

The Jewish mind thinks in terms of wholeness, a wholeness that is not simply a sum of the parts, but a diversified unity in which individuals are enriched by their participation. The fullness does not gain with the addition of individuals nor become defective with any loss. It takes its character from its source rather than the individuals who comprise it. It is 'qualitative' rather than 'quantitative'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The 'perfect family' does not become less perfect at the birth of more children, nor in fact were one of the children to die; its 'perfection' is within itself irrespective of the number of parts. So it is with the church.

Christ's new humanity is the most embracing unity it is possible to conceive. 'Redemption' is the 'ingathering' into Christ the creation of one new person (Eph 2:15). The 'fullness of Christ' is the ingathered church (Eph 3:17-19; Jn 17:23).

### A Vision of Church

A global Christian community of faith that expresses itself locally with the greatest possible diversity, while at the same time completely united in the centrality of the person of Jesus, who is the incarnation of the character of God. Thus demonstrating the truth that there is only one church whose structure and practice are shaped appropriately by shared values.

A people of God who are collectively and mutually enriched by their many historic traditions, while creatively engaged with contemporary society at every level. Working to meet the many needs of their particular locality and to enrich all aspects of its multi-faceted cultures.

A church that nurtures mature spirituality, individually and collectively, and which is supported by servant-enablers that affirm and empower every member so they develop an eager responsibility to contribute to the whole. A place of celebration and reflection, that is both safe and dangerous, secure and risk-taking.

Congregations that are characterised by real wisdom, that encourages thinking and questioning and enables them to engage effectively with the intellectual and moral challenges of the times, and to live in a way that is both provocative and attractive. Energised by spontaneity and freedom, yet marked out by compassion and love for those in need. Fearless in challenging injustice, while gentle in all their relationships among people and within the whole of creation.

A body of Christian disciples who have a sense of mission that sees evangelism as proclaiming the joyful good news of *shalom*. Inspired by a living hope, which looks for substantial change in the present time and has a confidence that through the power of the Spirit we are already, in this age, the first fruits of the renewed heaven and earth.

### Questions

1. What would be your definition of 'community' and why?
2. What is the significance between a 'personal faith' and a 'community of faith'?
3. How do most people in our society and Christian communities understand the word 'church'? What would be your main criticism of their understanding? How do you think the word should be understood and what is its relevance to the world today?



## Reading and Resources

- R Banks *'Paul's Idea of Community'* Hendrickson 1994  
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