

## **Here is the church**

*Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people.*

This simple children's rhyme sums up various things people think of as church, or even the history of how people have thought of church.

*Here is the church.*

People often think of a church as a building which is made and set aside for the worship of God. A place people go on Sunday mornings. A place to hear the gospel, to pray and to sing hymns.

The equivalent in New Testament times was the Jewish synagogue – a building within each community that was set aside for the worship and study of God. Jesus himself in his early ministry taught in the synagogues in Galilee and Nazareth – until he became unwelcome, or the crowds that came to hear him became too big.

*Here is the steeple.*

From the early days of being simply functional buildings, and as the power and wealth of the organised church grew, churches became grander and adorned. They became monuments to God – and a way demonstrate the power and glory of the church to the people.

*So we open the doors and see all the people.*

In recent times often the focus of what we think of as 'church' has been on the people. You probably know the song: "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together."

When church buildings are built these days, the focus is often on meeting the needs of the people beyond worship times. Pews have often given way to chairs that can be rearranged for different needs and so on. And we see of course, from time to time, churches leaving their buildings, meeting instead in schools and cafes and parks and even pubs. (which is great, but I do wonder what those people do when it comes to weddings and funerals).

But even when we regard church as a group of people, what group do we mean? Our congregations, our denominations, some "universal church".

And while we might think of 'church' as a building or a monument or a group of people, none of those ideas is right. Or perhaps more accurately, none of those is completely right.

And it might surprise you that I say that because, after all "I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together". Right?

But not quite: The next line of that song points us in the right direction: "All who follow Jesus, all around the world. Yes, we're the church together".

This "following" bit is a little weak, I think. We can get the impression that following Jesus is a bit like following a sporting team. So we might follow the Sydney Swans, or we might follow Manly Sea Eagles.

But while we do follow Jesus, it's not just about having an *interest* in Jesus, or thinking that Jesus is a bit better than the alternatives. As another hymn reminds us: "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord". Everything about the church is built on Jesus. Without faith and hope and trust in Jesus – Jesus who lived, Jesus who died, Jesus who rose again, and Jesus who will return – there is no church.

Another way we typically look at the church is to say that it is the body of Christ. Not the body of people who are interested in Christ. But the body of Christ.

Christ is the foundation. Or as Peter writes, Christ is the cornerstone. Or Paul later in Ephesians, that Christ is the head of the church.

Today's reading from Ephesians tells us about the church, Paul begins by urging the Ephesians to live a life worthy of the calling they have received. And that's something that comes up often in Paul's letters and in the gospels as well. Live a life worthy of the calling. Be exemplary. Do the right thing. By your love, all people shall know that you are Jesus' disciples.

Verses 2 and 3 explain how we should be working together as the community, as the church: Be humble. Be gentle. Be patient. Bear with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Wouldn't it be great if everyone was humble and gentle and patient and worked together in love and peace? And I wonder how we are all going with those things? Because they're nice thoughts, aren't they? But they need to be more than just nice thoughts – they have to be our actions, too.

The next few verses – 4 through to 10 – move away from telling us how we should be living, to giving us some really solid theology. And that can seem to be a change a change of topic, but listen to it: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all...” (4:4-6)

It’s very specific, isn’t it? One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith and so on.

One is of course the unit. And unity is moving together to be one. We are the Uniting Church in Australia – because we’re not there yet, but that’s where we want to go. This thought from Paul isn’t simply abstract theology, but it’s Paul telling us what brings us together in unity in the body of Christ.

There is a basic human need to belong. To be part of one body. And that’s what Paul tells us we are – part of the body of Christ.

We need to be careful, though, because it’s easy to fall into the trap of seeing “unity” as our goal: unity is not an end in itself. The unity to which we are called is unity in Christ. It’s not just being together, but it’s being together in Christ.

And that’s not always an easy thing: If we were just trying to achieve it on our own, as a group of people with good intentions, we would fail. But again, the body of Christ is not simply a group of people. Jesus is its foundation, Jesus is its cornerstone and Jesus is its head. Jesus gives the body of Christ presence in the world, and shape and direction.

And we are all equipped by Jesus, through the blessings of the Holy Spirit, to work toward that unity. Our function is to be Jesus’ feet – and go to people. Our function is to be Jesus’ hands – and reach out to people.

Paul mostly quotes Psalm 68 when he says “When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people”. Jesus’ ascension to heaven was followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the counsellor or helper, that Jesus promised prior to his death (John 14), and the outpouring of the spirit equipped Christians – the Ephesians, and us – to do works of service so that the unity of the body of Christ could be built up. So that we could grow in the knowledge and love of God, so that we could be mature in Christ.

In verse 11, Paul tells us some of the roles we fill as individuals: evangelists, pastors and so on. We are not all called to do the same things. We have

different roles, different capabilities, and different skills. In 1 Corinthians, Paul spells it out for us: There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all [people].” (1 Cor 12:4-6).

1 Corinthians also has that passage where Paul comments that whatever gifts we might each have, if we don't have love, then we have nothing.

And it is by love that Christians are to be known. (John 13:34-35)

And that love shows in the humility, the gentleness, the patience and the bond of peace that Paul talks about here in Ephesians.

Throughout this we are being transformed by the Holy Spirit. Our goal, Paul tells us, or our destination, is unity in the faith and maturity in Christ. As we grow in the knowledge and love of God through Jesus' grace, we will surely grow closer to each other, as well as growing closer to God. From verse 13 “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”.

And as we grow we become more resilient, too. Less likely to be distracted. Less likely to be misled. We must, Paul tells us in verse 14, “no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming”.

That's something that we have to do actively: We need to be sure of what we are told. We are fortunate to have the scriptures – the bible – so easily accessible, but we need to take advantage of that and to read the scriptures. To take what we read into our hearts and minds so that we can seek what God is saying to us here in St Ives in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Paul warns us here: don't be confused. Don't be duped. Don't be misled.

Instead, Paul tells us in verse 15, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. Be focused on Christ.

When we talk about unity within the church, we often focus on the need for inclusiveness, the need to tolerate and even embrace diverging views, the need to make allowances for others.

But we need to be careful, because tolerance isn't what Paul is calling us to. The theologian N T Wright says that: "Tolerance is a cheap, low-grade parody of love. Tolerance is not a great virtue to aspire to. Love is much tougher and harder."

As individuals, and as a church, we don't need to be simply tolerant, but we need to be loving. Loving of people who are not like us. Loving of people who are like us, too.

Eastern and Western and Protestant and Catholic and denominational and congregational differences exist, and it would be foolish for us to try and deny those things. We have different ideas of how worship should be conducted, the role of priests or ministers or lay leaders, whether baptism should be only of adults or can be of infants as well, the sorts of hymns we sing, who is able to participate in communion and so on and on and on. And behind each of those differences is hundreds or thousands of years of development and refinement and consideration. And often scriptural backing too. And I think that reflects our difference as individuals, too.

But unity on every detail of how we worship – and how we live - is not what Paul is talking about. In verse 3 he talks about the unity the spirit gives, in verse 13 the unity inherent in our faith and in verse 16 he refers to the whole body.

And that whole body is the body of Christ. The church. The church for which Jesus came, Jesus died, Jesus rose again, Jesus ascended into heaven. And the church for which Jesus will come again.

Unity is about coming together in faith in Christ.

Paul tells us that Jesus is the head, and "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (4:16)

That's one of the marvellous things about what God has done for us in Christ. We're not all absorbed into uniformity. We don't all think the same way. We don't all have the same skills or the same roles to play. We are all individuals, we are all unique and uniquely gifted by God, and so we all have our own part to play in the body of Christ.

That can be a daunting prospect, but the spread of the good news of Jesus, the bringing about of God's kingdom, isn't dependant on me or on any one of us,

but we all get to be part of it. And we get to be part of it, in unity with each other and with Christians across the world and across the years.

Of course, in these Covid times, some of our traditional views of church don't work. Our buildings are empty. Our groups aren't meeting. Our people aren't gathering. But we are still the church. And as things have changed, we've seen how the church works change too. When we went into our first lockdown last year, just about every congregation I know managed to shift to some form of on-line worship within a week. And in doing that our worship extended beyond the traditional church attenders. At Carlingford, we were checking on-line views, and we had regular, weekly attendance from one person in Malaysia, and two people in New Zealand. We know who the one in Malaysia was, but we have no idea of the New Zealanders.

I know here at St Ives over the last few weeks, you've been joined by Astonishment and others from South Africa. And I've been joining too.

Of course, many, many things are harder. Not everyone can manage on-line worship. We miss meeting together. We miss gathering together. We miss our church building and we miss our fellowship. And we miss singing!

The song tells us that I am the church, you are the church, and we are the church together. But the church is more than just all of us together. The church is the *body of Christ* – Jesus is the head, and on him the whole body depends.

We are sisters and brothers in Christ. Our faith is in Jesus. Our unity is in Jesus. And most of all, our hope and our future is in Jesus.

As the great hymn which we are going to have next reminds us: Through toil and tribulation and tumult of her war, the church waits the consummation of peace for evermore.

Amen.