

Monday Evening - English

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Preacher: Rev Dr Malcolm Maclean

[0 : 00] We can turn back to the passage we read, Ephesians chapter 2, and we can think together about verses 19 to 22.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. We are told that it is good to ask questions.

But I suppose it is only good to ask questions if they can't be answered. And it is also very important that when we do ask a question, that we get the right answer.

[1 : 35] Or if somebody asks us a question, that we give to them the right answer. Sometimes, of course, the question might seem straightforward, but the resultant answer might be quite long.

Because the topic that has been probed is one that is very large. If someone was to ask us, what is a Christian?

Or who is a Christian? There are lots of answers we give to that. We could say about them that a Christian is a believer.

Or a Christian is a disciple. Or things like that. Or if somebody was to ask us, what is the church? We could say it is a gathering of people who meet together to worship.

And, of course, the answers that I have just suggested are correct. But if we think about them, to say that a Christian is a believer or a disciple, is actually to individualize it.

[3 : 09] You can be a believer by yourself. And you can be a disciple by yourself.

So, that pair of answers don't give a full answer. And similarly, to say that the church is only a gathering of people who meet to worship God, doesn't really say what the church is.

In the verses that we read there from Ephesians chapter 2, Paul answers both these questions.

And he tells us what a Christian is. And he tells us what the church is. Or at least, what the church is like.

And in these verses, he gives three answers. And he says that the church is like a city.

[4 : 22] And the church is like a household. And the church is like a temple. And we can work out from that, that a Christian is a citizen.

And that a Christian is a member of a household. And that a Christian is a stone in a temple. So, I just want us to think briefly about each of these illustrations of a Christian and the church.

So, we are citizens. The illustration of a city is a very common one in the Bible.

And we sang two Psalms that mention it. Psalm 122, for example, when it's referring to Jerusalem. And then also in Psalm 107, where those who are found by God then start walking towards a city.

We're told by Abram that he looked for a city whose builder and maker was God. And we automatically assume that what is meant by that is heaven.

[5 : 50] But maybe Abram was looking for something far, well, not far bigger, because that's not the right way of putting it.

But maybe what Abram thought was the city is not only the place he went to when he died. He may have had some bigger concept in his mind as he looked ahead to the city that God was going to bring into existence.

And anyway, we're told about the God himself with regard to these early believers in him, that he was not ashamed to be called their God because he has prepared for them a city.

And in Psalm 87, we are told about a city and its citizens, a city about whom great things are said and glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God.

And one of the glorious features of this coming city is the range of its inhabitants. And the list of countries that are mentioned there in Psalm 87, they picture enemies because they come from Babylon and Egypt and Tyre and so on.

[7 : 18] So this new city that's promised and whom great things are going to happen is composed of those who once were enemies.

And of course, when we get to the end of the Bible, to the book of Revelation, God's people are likened to the New Jerusalem, to a city that comes down from out of heaven from God.

So the city is a common image. In Paul's time, there was only one city that mattered.

And that city was, of course, Rome. And the highest privilege that someone could have would be to be a Roman citizen.

One didn't have to live in Rome to be a Roman citizen. Paul himself was a Roman citizen. He didn't live in Rome. But it was a privilege that was given to suitably qualified people throughout the empire.

[8 : 32] And whatever they were, they had the rights of a Roman citizen. And I suspect Paul is drawing in all these features to speak about this city that he has in mind here.

Although the city he has in mind here is far better and far bigger than any other city that exists at that time or even today.

What does he say about the inhabitants of this city? Well, he tells us who they are because he says that they are all saints. We are fellow citizens with the saints.

Someone once pointed out to me a detail and I have no idea where it's significant or not. But I'll just leave it with you to think about.

And this individual said that the word saint never occurs in the singular. That everywhere is mentioned in the Bible it's in the plural.

[9 : 42] And maybe there's something in that. Because sadly, the normal concept of a saint in religious terminology is of someone who is so elevated that he or she is by themselves or else they go off into the desert and live by themselves.

And they live in isolation. For us in the Bible, the word saint always occurs in the plural. So they are together.

But what is a saint? We usually, we use a term to apply to an individual who's done something unusual.

Maybe their life has been dedicated to good works or something like that. And we regard them as saints, so and so.

We don't need to remind ourselves that that's not how the Bible describes a saint. Although good works are very important.

[11 : 07] A saint, the members of this new city that God is putting together, I would say has got two features. One is, they have been cleansed.

They've been, they've been cleansed by the blood of Christ. That's how they are made holy. They are separated to God. That's what the word saint or sanctified basically means.

And we're sanctified by the blood of Christ. We're cleansed. every member of this city is clean in God's sight.

And that's a wonderful range of citizens to have, isn't it? I mean, every city in the ancient world would have a kind of register of all its inhabitants and connected to all these individuals would be who they are or what they did.

Well, in God's cities sitting beside all of them, saints. And that doesn't mean it's boring, of course, because each one that's cleansed by the blood of Jesus has also been given the Holy Spirit to live in their hearts.

[12 : 25] And when we think who the Holy Spirit is, well, he's the one, the divine person that touches creation or touches humans and makes them bad to come to their potential and each one of them is unique and the Holy Spirit is a work in their lives and he is renewing them.

And that's what the church is. And that's marvelous, isn't it? to, what's it like to be a citizen of God's city?

Well, we're cleansed from our sins and the Holy Spirit indwells us and he's at work in our lives turning us into Christlikeness.

An extraordinary city, isn't it? Yeah, as we look at these saints who have been cleansed who have been cleansed and in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, we are not to limit the city to this earth.

God only has one city. And some of the saints, perhaps most of the saints, because we don't know the numbers, but some of the saints in God's city are no longer in this world.

[13 : 48] they are in heaven and they are no longer sinners. But they are still indwelt by the Holy Spirit and in heaven they have more of him than we experience, but he's at work in their lives.

And in that part of the city, you want to put it that way, he is there. And then there's ones like us who are here on earth. So God's city is made up of sinless saints and sinful saints.

And that's really unusual, isn't it? I mean, God hasn't got two cities. He hasn't got a city on earth and a city in heaven. He only has one city.

And in this amazing city, there are sinless saints saints and sinful saints. And yet, extraordinary, Paul goes on and says about these saints that they are all fellow citizens.

Each of them, whether they're a sinful saint or a sinless saint, they both have equal rights to city membership. I mean, Paul, who actually, as we know, wrote these words, he wrote them as a sinful saint, but he's now a sinless saint, but he's got no more right to the city membership than we have.

[15 : 20] And that's really extraordinary. And we have a right to the city membership because we're saints. Not because we're either a sinless saint or a sinful saint.

The membership comes because God has made us saints. And this city is really amazing, isn't it? People apparently today like to say they're from London or from New York or from some other city of the world and they'll highlight some of its features that they're proud of.

Well, the city of God, the residents of its city have got a lot to boast about.

And what they have to boast about is what God has done for all the citizens. there are lots of people living in London and just because of human inability those that run the city can't do anything for them.

That's true of all the major cities of the world but that's never true of the heavenly city. The one who runs this city knows all the people who belong to it and he takes care of them all whether they're in the part in heaven or the part on earth.

[16 : 54] So someone asks you this coming week who are you? Tell them you're a citizen of God's city and tell them what it means because there's no other city like it.

people but then there's the second image. I suppose cities got the idea of privilege as I kind of mentioned earlier with Roman citizenship but then there's the second image that of household and in the ancient world a household wasn't limited to a family.

In the ancient world there would usually be slaves or servants of some kind and they would belong to the household and I think when Paul here says that the church is composed of members of a heavenly household he has in mind service.

you can't belong to a household and not serve. That's just the fact of life.

Indeed some people think when the Bible refers to Jesus as Lord it's got the idea of a master of a household sometimes and he's arranging individuals to engage in different parts of service.

[18 : 40] And we want to serve Christ don't we? Well how do we do that? Because as with the word city the household is done together isn't it?

And the activities are done for the benefit of the household. So how do we do that? Well Pope Peter says this as he's writing his first letter As each has received a gift That's each person in the household As each has received a gift use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace God's people together serve one another by using the particular gift or talent that God has given to them and when they all do it then what an amazing place the church is

I suspect that if we asked an average person outside the church what goes on the church they would say people sit or they might say they stand to sing or something like that and a man at the front says something but the Bible's picture of a church one of them is that everybody's active there are no observers but everybody is doing something and if the individual in a household doesn't do what he or she is meant to do then the entire household suffers even if we took it to a mundane level if somebody's house if one servant was meant to go to their shops and somebody else was meant to do something else and somebody else meant to do something else and if two or three of them decided not to bother then the entire household is going to suffer so

God expects us to use our gifts and talents whatever they happen to be now like the city the amazing thing of this household is there's only one household so there are some of the servants in heaven and some of the servants in earth some of the servants in God's household do their work perfectly the spirits of just men made perfect in heaven they're not inactive we don't know what they're doing but in some way or other they're participating in the service of God and of course in the world to come once the resurrection occurs they'll be engaged in service but when they go to heaven they don't just go there to go and do nothing but they take part in however they do it we don't know but they take part in the activities of

God's household and there's us on earth and we do what we do although we're sinners but you know and this is so obvious and it may sound very strange when I say it the ones who have gone to heaven can't do anything on earth even although they are sinless it's impossible for them to do anything in God's household on earth so it's left to us to do it even although we might find ourselves very sinful we are the ones that God wants to serve him in his church on earth and because it's a household it is intimate service everybody else in the household knows what the others are doing it's not a place for secrecy and for hiding our light away so people can't see what's been done the activities are obvious and they're done out of humility and all that but the household knows what's going on

[24 : 01] I think it's a marvelous picture of a church full of servants nobody idle nobody just observing but all participating according to the gift that God has given to them and then the third picture is that of a temple and Paul spends most of this brief section focusing on it and temples of course were familiar sites in the ancient world indeed in Ephesus there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world the temple of Diana so whether he's writing to Jews who would be aware of the temple in

Jerusalem or the writing to Gentiles who would have seen this temple of Diana in Ephesus every day they knew what a temple was like and what was required to build one so Paul takes that illustration and says four things about the temple that God is building he mentions the foundation and he mentions the corner stone and he mentions the stones that's the structure and then he mentions the main occupant who is God himself I just want to think briefly about what he says there because he's describing the church he's describing us our foundation the apostles and prophets what does he mean by apostles and prophets well there's various options and

I can just mention them so you can think about it yourself but one is that we know who the apostles are they're the ones that Jesus chose but the controversies about who Paul means here by prophets so some people say it's New Testament prophets like Agabus who predicted there would be a famine and things like that and Silas too he's also called a prophet so some people think it's the New Testament apostles and New Testament prophets second view is that what's in mind here is there's a New Testament apostles and the Old Testament prophets and that's advocated because there's believers in both the Old Testament and the New Testament I mean personally I suspect that since there's only one definite article it's the apostles and prophets that it could mean the apostles who are also prophets so the

Paul is saying that there's a sure foundation here but he's not meaning the individuals who are apostles he's meaning the message of the apostles that is the foundation of the church according to this illustration of the temple that is all built on the message of Jesus that's what the apostles passed on Jesus told them to go into all the world teaching people to observe all things that he had commanded them so the temple of God is built on the gospel and that's a good foundation to have at the same time we're told that Jesus is the corner stone and in the ancient world I know nothing about building nothing at all actually so apart from the fact that it requires bricks and a foundation and so on but and I'm not able to contrast the way people built things in the first century to the way they built them today but apparently a cornerstone in the ancient world held the building together and if the cornerstone wasn't an appropriate one the whole building would collapse the entire building even though there were stones at the bottom layer which would be called the foundation it all held together by the cornerstone that just kind of forced them into place and therefore the whole building was dependent on the cornerstone and

Paul here points out that this temple depends entirely on Jesus it's not the apostles who hold it together it's Jesus who holds it together and it's all built on him and that's a marvelous base to have isn't it because Jesus well he's both God and man and Paul when he's using this illustration he obviously expands it beyond normal buildings and he goes on to say that the whole structure grows out of Jesus because he says in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord he's pointing out what's impossible in a normal building but which occurs in this spiritual building which is that every stone in this structure is linked to the

[30 : 34] Lord so it means that somebody who was converted today is as linked to Jesus as somebody who saw him when he was here on earth and believed in him they're all connected to Jesus they got a direct link to him by the Holy Spirit now the apostles where are they they're in heaven the stones that were added in the first century where are they they're in heaven the stones have been added right up until recently where are they they're in heaven as with the city and as with the household so are the temple part of it's in heaven and part of it's on earth and we have no idea of what level we're at the moment are we near the top who knows for all we know we could still be down at the bottom of the building and there could be centuries to come in which millions and millions of stones are yet to be added to this heavenly temple but the one thing we can say about this temple is that it's the biggest building in the world

I mean if you google in something and ask what's the biggest building in the world they'll point you to somewhere in Dubai but it's only a couple of thousand feet up when we turn to the book of Revelation and get a picture of the new Jerusalem it's 1500 it's an extraordinary size this temple that has been built and we don't know where we are in its progress we might not even be halfway there yet but this temple is growing and we are part of it and all over the world it's growing there are stones being added in Britain and in China and in South America and in Africa and in India and in every place of the earth they're all being added to this building now when

I pass a building site and I glance at the various bricks etc who are there for five seconds or so it seems to look to me as if they're all the same unless there's some particular feature going to go into the building but all the bricks are just piled there and they all look entirely the same but the extraordinary thing about this building this temple is that there's no two stones the same they're all different and yet the extraordinary thing is they all slot in perfectly and once they are put into the building all these stones start growing it's not just that the temple itself is growing by having more stones but the stones itself grow and they develop and yet this building is never lopsided it's all held together by the cornerstone and it's as we're told elsewhere in the

Bible it's full of living stones and they get their life from Jesus so as we grow and we have to grow because the Christian life is about growth and grace but we don't all grow at the same rate and yet the extraordinary thing is we never seem out of place in this amazing temple that God is building together and the temple in the Bible usually is a home it's a home for God it's called his house his dwelling place that's what the temple in Jerusalem was for it was God's home his home on earth but it no longer is his home God no longer dwells in temples made with hands but he hasn't stopped dwelling in temples or

I should say he hasn't stopped dwelling in a temple and this temple in which he is in parts in heaven and parts on earth and it's the same God that's in both parts and he's constantly in both parts and because he is in it the temple is holy it's his presence that makes the temple holy it's not the fact that some of them are now sinless in heaven that makes it holy and it's not just that the ones on earth are forgiven that makes it holy it's the presence of the living God that makes it unique and separate and makes this building a totally wonderful place someone says to you today who did you meet yesterday

[36 : 44] I don't know if they asked you that question but who did you meet who do you meet every Sunday or whatever day you gather you meet with God the living God the perfect God the God of grace the God of mercy the same God who at this moment Paul in his glorified spirit looks at with admiration that same God meets with us and in case we get caught up with the big picture and there's always that possibility Paul there in the last verse brings it down to the people in

Ephesus and he says to them in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the spirit and of course there he's describing what we would call a local congregation and there's just two things I want to say about it because Paul mentions them and they're very important how do we describe a church church well the first word is it's people who are together they are built together I mean that just means they're joined God has joined them they no longer have the authority not to be part of it they are joined together by him he's building them together

I mean why do you live in the year 2019 why weren't you born in 1862 or something because God in his wisdom wanted you to be built together in Stornoway or whatever your coniguation is in 2019 built together that's what a church is but why they are built together so that God will have a dwelling place the one who is omnipresent wants to have places where he is especially present and the place where he wants that he has chosen for that is the church so yesterday and just now for that matter we are in the presence of the triune God this is this is his dwelling place you and I will go to different homes when we leave here most of us to our own homes this is

God's home this is where he dwells the father the son and the spirit they are full of wisdom they know what is the best place for them to dwell and the place that they have revealed has been suitable for them is the church of Jesus Christ those made up of the redeemed who have been cleansed from their sins in whom the Holy Spirit dwells who are members of his city who are serving in his household and who are built together into something that reflects the bigger church the local congregation is an expression of the entire church and what marks the entire church is that it is built together so that's

Paul answering questions what is a Christian what is the church and I hope we can say it's the most wonderful building in the world the most wonderful household and the most wonderful city so may God bless these thoughts to us shall we pray Lord we give thanks that you have set up your dwelling place the psalmist said about the temple that he knew how wonderful your dwelling place was and in comparison to everything else that existed at the time it was truly wonderful temple but yet in comparison to what has happened since

[43 : 09] Jesus came that temple no longer is the place to where we would go and say how lovely it is because now we know there's something that's even lovelier and that's the church you're building today one day we know the entire church is going to be perfect and that'll be a wonderful sight when the building is completed but until then we have the opportunity of belonging to your dwelling place and help us to be thankful that you always condescend to be where you feel at home let the Father the Son and the Spirit desire intensely to be with their people and may we in return express to them in our worship and in our gratitude how grateful we are that that is what our God decided so Lord bless us and keep us and remember us for Christ's sake amen we can conclude by singing

Psalms 133 from Sing Psalms it's on page 175 Psalm 133 How excellent a thing it is how pleasant and how good when brothers dwell in unity and live as brothers should we can sing the whole psalm how excellent how excellent a thing it is how pleasant and how good when brothers dwell in unity and live as brothers should for it is like the precious oil poured out on Aaron's head that one is over down his beard upon his color spread like air monster upon the hill of

Zion in his hands the Lord bestows his blessing there the life that never ends if you please be seated