

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
23/08/2020
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 Israelites oppressed – The birth of Moses

Psalms 124 The Lord will protect us from evildoers

Romans 12: 1-8 Offer ourselves as living sacrifices
We all have different gifts to offer

Matthew 16: 13-20 Peter says Jesus is the Messiah
Peter will be the Rock on which the Church is Built

Introduction

Today I'd like focus on the reading from Romans and also Matthew's Gospel. These readings both look at aspects of how the Church is to operate. I'd like to look at what we think the Church is, and also how we take our place as members of the Church.

Definition of the word Church

Firstly, what do we think of when we hear the word Church? Some might say – Oh that's what happens on a Sunday morning isn't it?, or they associate it with Priests and all that stuff. Others might think of this building or maybe another building where they grew up. Others think of the Church as an institution. Still others might think of a specific denomination – such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Uniting Church or our own Anglican Church.

All of these images have some truth to them, at least partially anyway, but I think for me the best definition of Church comes when we stand up and greet each other at the Greeting of the Peace.

What do we say?

We are the body of Christ. His Spirit is with us.
The Peace of the Lord be always with you
And also with you.

So the word Church can stand for many things, but it finds its fullness in the gathering of those who make it up. Without members there is no church. So you are Church, and I am Church. But it is not individually, it is collectively that we are church. The Greek word used for church in the New Testament is "ekklesia" and this translates as an assembly. In early times the Church was both the small local gathering as well as all believers. All those who accepted Jesus and decided to follow Jesus.

Matthew's Gospel

And what do we hear about the Church in Matthew's Gospel today. We hear Jesus talking to Peter about the Church, but first we hear Jesus setting the scene for this discussion. First he asks the question who do people say that I am? He gets various answers of different prophets. Some say John the Baptist, Some Elijah, still others Jeremiah. Now prophets are important, but they are of course merely human, just like the rest of us. He then puts the question directly to his disciples But who do you say that I am? As usual we hear Peter jump in and answer for the disciples:-

You are the Christ – the Son of the living God.

Jesus acknowledges that Peter didn't work this out on his own, but was helped by God. I think Jesus was just giving the disciples the opportunity to really acknowledge him. After all, we heard in Matthew's gospel two weeks ago when Jesus walked on the water, the disciples in the boat said:-

“Truly you are the Son of God.”

So Jesus is setting the scene for talking about His Church, not a Church based on something manmade, like a prophet, but a Church that is built upon Jesus, upon God himself. And then he says to Peter – “On this rock I will build my Church”. And we do hear of Peter's prominence in the early church. We heard earlier in the year in readings from the Acts of the Apostles, how Peter stood up at Pentecost and addressed the Crowds, and how he led the church after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

Jesus then says about the church, that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. What does this mean? The Gates of Hades is associated with the Devil, death and all that is evil. So the devil in the end will not prevail against God's Church. We should feel comforted, but not complacent by this. The Devil is at work in the world, but through Jesus and as part of Jesus' Church we have power over the devil.

Jesus then tells Peter that he will give him the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Over the years there has been much debate over the meaning of this conversation with Peter, and especially what these keys might represent. Some say the keys represent authority to carry out Church discipline and administration, others say they represent the authority to announce the forgiveness of sins. I'd like to look at it much more broadly. I think these keys represent the opportunity and the responsibility to open the Kingdom of heaven to those who don't yet know Jesus. It's not about locking people out, but rather about letting them in. And for those who do come to know Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is wide open.

So in our Gospel reading this morning we firstly hear Jesus making sure his disciples are very clear on who he is, before he directs Peter on some aspects of what God's Church will entail.

Romans

And now I'd like to look into the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. We hear Paul giving instructions for those who are part of the Church. He urges those who are part of the Roman church to offer their bodies as living sacrifices. This sounds rather a strange combination of words if you think about it. A sacrifice was normally something that was killed. So how does a living sacrifice work? But we say these words to this effect at the end of each service. Can you recall what we say:-

Father,
we offer ourselves to you
as a living sacrifice
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Send us out in the power of your Spirit
to live and work to your praise and Glory.

So as a living sacrifice we are to live and work as God would have us live, as members of His Church. And Paul gives us some hints.

First he says "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought." He doesn't say put yourself down, but rather be realistic about the Gifts God has given you, in working out how best to serve him. Now, I'm not a great singer so it would be an unrealistic goal for me to think that the best use of my talents would be to strive to be a Christian Singing artist and make CD's

Paul also points out that as members of the Church, as members of Christ's body, we are like members of a human body. Each part has its own role to play and each role is different. And each part is there for the benefit of the other parts.

And Paul encourages us to take our role not reluctantly, but with enthusiasm.

Let's look at verse 6-8 of what Paul has to say again.

⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Now this is not an exhaustive list. There are no doubt many other gifts and talents we have and can use to build up the church. But it shows that whilst we are all different, we all have our part to play, in building one another up.

Conclusion

I'd like to finish off this morning with a few questions for us to consider, as we go out from our worship this week.

How do we continue to be church?

What do we do in our lives to show that we are part of the body of Christ?

And how do we live out our lives as Living sacrifices?

Amen.