

Sunday 2nd June 2013 Christ Church 6.30 pm

1 Peter 2:4-12 — The Healthy Church – People of Praise

I wonder if I were to carry out a survey this evening, what sort of answers I would get to the question 'what is the point of the church?' Here we all are; and many of us would want to say that we are part of Christ Church. But — why does Christ Church exist?

Well, I guess that there could be many answers to that question — and some of them would be better than others. But if we really want to know why we exist as a church, the place to start has to be the Bible. And that is what we are doing on these Sunday evenings in June. Asking — what does it mean to be a healthy church, and then looking for answers in God's word.

Last week we started with the fundamental reason that the church exists — to make disciples. A church can be doing many other things — serving the community, helping the disadvantaged, visiting the sick and lonely. Those are all really good things to do — they are things which I would expect Christians to be involved in. But, they are not the reason that the church exists. Christ Church exists to make disciples.

A healthy church is one in which disciples are growing. And over the next few Sunday evenings, we'll think a bit more about what that means. And to start us off tonight, let's turn to the Bible.

READING

1 Peter 2 :9 gives us a wonderful God's eye view of the church. *But you re a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.* Isn't that a lovely picture of what it means to be church. We have been chosen by God. We are all priests — what that means is that we can all come into God's presence freely because of what Jesus has done for us. And because of what Jesus has done, we are holy. We know that we are all too capable of sin — but in God's eyes, that sin has been forgiven, and we stand before him with no trace of sin. We are holy people. And we belong to God.

That is a God's eye view of the church. God has chosen us, accepted us, forgiven us, and made us his very own for all eternity. But that still leaves us with the question — 'why?' What does God want his church to be doing?

But you re a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Why does the church exist? To declare the praises of God.

And I guess that in one sense that is pretty obvious. Every week, as we meet here in Christ Church, we sing God's praise. But — this passage in 1 Peter will help us to be a bit more specific about the praise that God wants.

Where does God's praise start? I guess that many people would say that it is as they see the beauty of this world God has created. If you have ever seen a beautiful sunset, or the intricacy of a butterfly's wing, or gazed out into space on a clear night — it hits you, doesn't it. What an amazing world. What an amazing creator. And our hearts fill with praise. Psalm 19:1 — *The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands.* Psalm 8:1 *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.* Psalm 95 — *Come, let us sing with joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. For the Lord is the great God, the great king above all gods. In his hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands moulded dry land.*

Yes — that is the praise God deserves. We are to 'declare the praises of him'. Or a better translation would be that we should declare the praise-worthy deeds, the wonderful deeds of God. A few years ago I was talking to a friend who had been teaching in Vancouver, which is the home of political correctness! She was saying that praising the child was seen as so important that you had to praise them whether they were right or not. 'Who can tell me what 3+4 is?' '8'. 'That's a really good answer — well done! Does anyone else have a different answer?' But that is not how our praise of God should be — we praise him for what he has actually done, and for what that tells us about him.

When we sing our praise in church, we should be singing about who God is and about what he has done. We need to make sure that what we sing is actually telling the truth about God, because praise must be declaring the great things he has done.

But 1 Peter 2:9 actually takes us an important step further than that. But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The world which God has created is wonderful. But God has done something even more wonderful than that. He has brought us out of darkness into his wonderful light. Despite the fact that we turned our backs on him, and did what we want rather than what he wants, he still loves us, and even though we were his enemies, he has made us his people. And that is the great reason we have to praise him.

But, of course, we can only do that if we have turned from darkness to light, if we have become his. You see, genuine praise has to start with a response to God. If we are to praise God, it has to start with bowing ourselves before him. You cannot praise God whilst at the same time rejecting him as Lord.

Praise isn't just politely applauding God for making a nice world — praise begins with acknowledging that God is God, and that has to mean bowing the knee before him, and taking our place in his kingdom.

So — first — praise involves declaring what God has done. But first and foremost, it involves coming from darkness into the light.

But what does that mean in practice? Well, it's there in v.5 — you also like stones are being built into a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Our praise is only acceptable to God when it is offered through Jesus.

It's good that this is a communion service this evening, because I think that helps to explain what Peter is talking about here. Because it is right at the heart of the good news. And it is something that I think we all too easily forget, because maybe we don't like the truth — it can be very painful at times.

The truth is that every one of us are sinners. What that means is that each one of us naturally lives our own way, instead of living God's way — the great theologian Karl Barth once said that sin is just refusing to let God be God — and we all do it. And that means that we are cut off from God. We can't know him, we can't praise him. And there is nothing we can do about it. But wonderfully, when Jesus died, he took on himself the punishment that our rebellion against God deserves, so that we could be forgiven. That's what this communion service reminds us about — the bread and wine are reminders of Jesus dying for us. And it is only as we trust him that we are able to know God, and able to praise God. Before you can praise God because he is so good, you have to face just how bad you are! In a way, real praise has to start with tears.

We can only praise God through Jesus — Hebrews 13:15 puts it even more clearly — through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name. It is only as you confess the name of Jesus that you can praise God.

So — we praise God for who he is and for the great things he has done. Most of all that means praising him for bringing us from darkness into his wonderful light. And that means coming to him through Jesus — trusting him. Genuine praise always begins at the cross.

So what does that have to do with making disciples? I think it is that when we are praising God for the wonderful things he has done, at the same time we are reminding one another of those things. Real dynamic worship in church should build people up in their faith, because it is declaring the truth about God. Graham Kendrick once wrote that the person who chooses the songs for a service is the most influential theologian in the church — because it is songs which work at a deep level in us.

So if our music is pleasing to the Lord, disciples in the church will be being built up. And if that isn't happening – we need to look at our praise, and ask whether we need to do things differently, whether what we are singing is actually declaring the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord.

But there is one other way in which our praise should lead to disciples growing. Because real praise won't just involve declaring his praises here in church, but also when we are out in the world. Yes, we will want to tell one another here how wonderful the Lord is, but we will also want to tell our families, our friends, our work-colleagues, our neighbours.

Our job as Christians is telling others how wonderful Jesus is. You might have heard me say before what the difference between worship and evangelism is. If you go to Anfield, and you shout out that Steven Gerrard is the greatest footballer in the world — that's worship. If you go to Old Trafford, and shout out that Steven Gerrard is the greatest footballer in the world — that's evangelism!

But whether we are telling those who already believe, or whether we are telling those who don't yet know Jesus, our work is to declare his praises.

Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

If we want to declare the praises of Jesus, we need to make sure that the way we live our lives backs up what we say. I think that when Peter uses that phrase 'the day God visits us' he is talking about the day that a person hears the good news.

Earlier this year we were involved in Come to the Light. Later this year there will be special services as part of our anniversary, to which there will be a chance to invite family or friends. And if you do bring someone along, they'll hear the good news about Jesus explained.

Now, if over the previous few months they had seen you living that good news out, if they had maybe heard you saying something about what the Lord has done for you, if they have been attracted to Jesus through how you live your life — then when they hear the good news, it will make sense, the penny will drop, and they will accept it, and glorify God.

But if over the past few months they had heard you gossiping or running people down, if you had been rude to them or if they had seen you doing things that are wrong — when they hear the good news, they'll just dismiss it — because it obviously has no

reality in your life. *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

What does a healthy church look like? It is a church where God's praise is declared, in such a way that his people are built up and others are drawn to him. That's what God wants us to be like – isn't it what you want?