

Conversations on the Journey – What is Church?

by Pete Dibdin

Good morning, it's great to be talking with you this morning, for the next instalment of our series called *Conversations on the Journey*. Now, when we started this series last month, I didn't actually introduce it, or explain the imagery behind the title – we just kind of got talking. And there was reason for that – apart from my dodgy short-term memory – we're on a journey, taking each moment step by step, not quite sure which route we'll take, but enjoy one another's company along the way. And when I'm out walking, conversations seem to naturally start from where you are, ebbing and flowing, back and forth, like the undulating hills of our beautiful countryside. And that was the feel I wanted for the series, conversations and talks on variety of themes, with a whole range of people sharing their thoughts and experiences of life. And today, the conversation moves around the theme of “*what is church?*”, which is a question many are asking at this time.

So, as I ask myself that question, I go back to the beginning, to ask, where does the word “church” come from? In English, the word church comes from the old English word “circe”, which has Germanic roots, taking it back to the Greek word “*kyriake*”, meaning “of the Lord”, as in “house of the Lord”, the place that belongs to God. Now, “*kyriake*” is used in the Bible, but it's not the word that's translated as church in the Bible. That's “*ecclesia*”, which was a very ordinary, everyday word meaning “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place”. Ancient Athens had a regular “*ecclesia*”, which was a gathering of the citizens of the city, who would meet together to discuss the running of the city, democratically electing military leaders, magistrates, and leading officials, indirectly voting on members of the court of the Areopagus, who cross examined Paul's belief in the resurrection of Jesus in Acts 17. “*Ecclesia*” was also the word used in Acts 19 to describe the protest of tradesmen in Ephesus, angry at Paul about the impact of believing in Jesus would have on their livelihoods which depended on the manufacture of household idols.

Ecclesia – the ordinary, everyday, gathering of citizens. It was rarely in a building, the people just gathered where they could – by the gate of the city walls, on a hillside just outside the city, in the market square, or down by the riverside. And it's into this context, that we hear the Bible's first use of the word ecclesia, written in Matthew 16, from verse 13:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the Son of Man is?'

They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

'But what about you?' Jesus asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'

On this rock, I will build my church (my ecclesia), and the Gates of Hades will not overcome it.

What is this rock on which Jesus would build? Is it Peter, after all, the name Peter does mean rock. Some say it is, but given that in the very next passage, Jesus is telling Peter, "Get behind me Satan", I do think Jesus had a firmer foundation in mind, after all, Jesus did say the wise man builds his house upon the rock not the shifting sands! Then, what is this rock? Surely, it's that which our Father in Heaven has revealed, the declaration of "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." That's the foundation on which an ecclesia of believers is formed, the declaration that, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Or as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12:3, "Jesus is Lord – words that can only be truly spoken the indwelling of the Holy Spirit." And that is the mark of a citizen of the Kingdom of God, and remember, an ecclesia is a gathering of not just anyone, but of citizens. That's why church can be 2 or 3 believers talking together, a local congregation meeting up in person or on Zoom, a town of Christians from all the different denominations, and there still room to be

the world wide church, every believer in every culture, declaring in their own language, that “Jesus is Lord!”.

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Notice that Jesus is very clear about who’s church it is. My church, says Jesus. Not the minister’s church, not the country’s church, not even the member’s church – but My Church, says Jesus. I think sometimes Christians can get quite possessive over their church, wanting it to be just so, serving their own wants and needs, rather than serving the community and seeking the lost. And if that’s the case, we need to shift our emphasis, because this is Jesus’ church. The rock, the foundation of the church, is Jesus. And nothing can stand in his way, not even a pandemic. Ok, so Jesus actually says, “the Gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Which is an interesting phrase, because that’s not a Jewish or Christian thought, that’s Greek mythology – Hades is the Greek god of the underworld, the realm of the dead, with the Gates of Hades being the impenetrable barrier that stops dead souls coming back to life. It’s a cultural reference which the people of the day would have understood. Some versions of the Bible use the translation Gates of Hell, but that implies the fight against good and evil, between Jesus and Satan, that just isn’t there in Jesus words. Hades wasn’t plotting against Jesus to destroy the church, but he was unstoppable, for no one can escape death. So, here Jesus is declaring “I will build my church, my ecclesia, my gathering of citizens in the Kingdom of God, and not even death can stop me doing that”. Jesus speaks of his own death, because not even the unstoppable power of death was strong enough to stop Jesus from being raised back to life. Jesus speaks of the generational nature of the ecclesia, that this movement wouldn’t fade out with the unstoppably passing of the first generation of believers, knowing that it would pass from generation to generation, ebbing and flowing, changing and transforming, building and rebuilding, but never wiped out or destroyed. And Jesus speaks of the eternal nature of the ecclesia, with the gathering of citizens of the Kingdom of God on earth transforming into the gathering of worshippers around the heavenly throne, a great multitude of believers that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne, crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits

upon the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelations 21). And that’s just the artists impression of the ecclesia that Jesus is building.

And though we make plans, to help us grow in our faith and make a difference in our neighbourhood and our frontlines, we can’t actually build the church. That’s Jesus’ job. And we need to continually remind ourselves of that, turning to Him in prayer, listening for his instructions, handing over the work of our hands into his plans, praying earnestly for the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our community and frontlines, and honouring the master builder – Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

And when we talk about Jesus building the church, I’m not talking bricks and mortar, like many assume church to be. The only other time in scripture when the words translated as build and church appear in the same verse is Acts 9:31:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

There you have it, Jesus is building his church through the equipping and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, working in and through those who honour the Lord (which is what “fear of the Lord” means). And that verse was written after a period of great persecution led by Saul, which caused great upheaval in the church, scattering believers all around the world – a persecution which only came to an end when Jesus himself spoke to Saul on the road to Damascus – an act of divine intervention from the builder of the church, creating the right conditions so that the gathering of God’s people could increase and spread.

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And speaking of great upheaval and scattering, 600 years before Jesus’ birth, the Jews were forced into exile in Babylon, their temple was closed by order of a government – well, completely destroyed after a two year siege from an invading superpower. But it was there in Babylon, where new expressions of Jewish worship started to emerge. Psalm 137 tells us they weren’t able to sing, which made that Psalm a rather ironic basis for Boney M cover of Rivers of Babylon in the late seventies. Anyways, the people gathered in one another’s

houses, to meet with one another, to pray and to talk about scripture. Houses would have been quite small back then, for exiles, the poorest of the poor, they'd be blessed to have one room to shelter in, a room where everything happened from sleeping to eat and from preparing meals to keeping the animals safe at night. But in small groups, in these small houses, they discover a new way of worshiping God, far away from the Temple and their system of sacrificial offerings. And even today, Rabbinic teaching says that you need just 10 Jews to make a synagogue – and I wonder, is that because you couldn't have got any more through the door in those ancient Babylonian times.

And it's gathering in a house that gives rise to the three Hebrew names for such a gathering: "*bet ha-tefilla*", which means "house of prayer", "*bet ha-kneset*" which means "house of assembly", and "*bet ha-midrash*", which means "house of study".

And Luke 4 tells us that it was Jesus' custom to go every week, to meet with other believers in one of these "houses of assembly". Where ever he was on his traveling from village to village, and from town to town, he'd join the local gathering. It was a house of prayer, with prayers of praise, thanksgiving, intercession, repentance and lament – and that's just the prayers written in the Book of Psalms. And it was a house of study, of reading scripture and debating scripture, interactively discussing it's meaning and it's application for today, discovering the revelation of God that speaks to us today. And here in Luke 4, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

On that day, it caused quite a debate, which resulted in those hear Jesus's words taking out of the house, to the edge of the town, with the intent of pushing Jesus over a very steep cliff edge!

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But for those who did hear Jesus' words, and come to believe like Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of the Living God, they became part of Jesus' ecclesia, given authority in his Name and the power through the Holy Spirit to go and make disciples, baptising them, and teaching them to obey everything Jesus taught them (Matthew 28).

And that's exactly what we see happening straight after the Day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, when the believers, having been baptised, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Do you hear the echoes of the synagogue in that? Devoted to the apostle's teaching – that a house of study. Devoted to fellowship – that's a house of assembly. Devoted to prayer – that's, unsurprisingly, a house of prayer. And added to that, the breaking of bread. Not just the act of communion, but full on meals with generous hospitality and gladness of heart. Why, because they were meeting in each other's homes, not a religious building. Yes, they still had the temple nearby, but even that would be destroyed a few decades later, just as it was at the start of the Babylonian exile. But they didn't need the temple anymore. They didn't need to make sacrifices anymore, because Jesus gave his life as a once for all sacrifice upon the cross, for the forgiveness of our sins to make us holy and perfect in his sight – that's what Hebrews 10:14 says.

And their gatherings were characterised by devotion to the Lord, awe at the power of God, togetherness is community, generosity in sharing and gladness in praise, resulting in favour with the people of the city, a growth in the number of believers and all glory and honour and praise going to Jesus, the one who is building his church!

In the early church, ecclesia gatherings came in all shapes and size. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 "where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there". Perhaps today, we could say were two households or 6 people from different households are gathered in Jesus's name – that's ecclesia, and Jesus is building his church.

The early church gathered in all kinds of places, wherever the people were. So, we see in Acts 16, when Paul is in Philippi, heading to the riverside, where people gathered outside in the fresh air, as a “house of prayer” – that’s ecclesia, and Jesus is building his church.

Then, in Acts 18:7, we catch up with Paul in Corinth, where he is gathering with others as a “house of study”, this time in the actual home of Titius Justus, where for 18 months Paul was teaching, studying, revealing the truth in Scripture, that Jesus is Lord – that’s ecclesia, and Jesus is building his church.

And then, in Acts 19:9, in the city of Ephesus, we see Paul setting up a daily gathering in the Hall of Tyrannus, which is most likely a room he hired from a teacher of philosophy names Tyrannus – “a house of assembly” – that’s ecclesia, and Jesus is building his church.

And today, we can be ecclesia, in the park, in our gardens, in the kitchen, on a walk, and even gathered in cyberspace through Zoom or YouTube – that’s ecclesia, and Jesus is building his church. But it’s not the number of people gathered or the location in which we come together that make an ecclesia – it’s the foundational purpose of why we gather, to declare with our words and with our daily lives, equipped and enabled by the Holy Spirit to say “Jesus is Lord!” – now that’s ecclesia, and Jesus is building his church.

It’s the Holy Spirit who enlightens our minds and emboldens our hearts, as we devote ourselves to the apostles teach recorded in the New Testament, debating, discussing, living it out in our daily lives. It’s the Holy Spirit who draws us together as into an eternal fellowship, scattered and gathered, sharing lives, sharing stories, sharing meals and sharing cuppa’s. It’s the Holy Spirit who gives meaning to the breaking of bread, transforming ordinary everyday meals into the extraordinary and the mysterious. And it’s the Holy Spirit who transforms our prayers mumbled in brokenness and weakness, into prayers offered in language beyond words at the very throne of God.

So this day, let us declare with one voice, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and hear once more that powerful promise of Jesus ***“I will build my church (my ecclesia), and the Gates of Hades will not overcome it.”***

Amen