

ST. ANDREW'S, BLACKROCK & BRAY - 18TH APRIL 2021

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS ABOUT CHURCH: WHAT IS CHURCH?

"Welcome to our 'Church at Home' service transcript for Sunday the 18th April 2021. This week we begin a new series looking at the essential questions about church, starting with 'What is Church?' I pray that you will be encouraged by it today." - Rev. Andrew Gill

Call to Worship – 1 John 3:1-2

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is

Opening Prayer

Father God,
Your holiness and majesty deserves more
blessings, honour, thanks, and praise
than we could ever speak or even conceive.

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, in word, and in deed.
Forgive what we have been, help us to correct what is,
and by grace guide us to what we shall be.
So that the love of goodness may always
be first in our hearts, and that for all our days
we might follow in the steps of Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of life and love,
Open the eyes of our faith,
that we may see, in his redeeming work,
your Son Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen

Reading - Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

The Lords Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

Sermon - Exploring Essential Questions about Church; What is Church?

I heard a sound this week, that I hadn't heard in a while; the sound of construction. This week I've been hearing the builders as they got back to work on the apartments around the corner from the manse. I'm sure in their excitement to get started they first checked over the blueprints and looked at the plans to make sure that what they were building was the right thing in the right place.

God willing, at some stage in the next few weeks, we will be allowed to resume our church services, and we will start rebuilding, what eventually we will call, normal church life. As we prepare for that, now is the perfect time to check over the blueprints, and to look at God's design for church. So over the next few weeks we are going to do this by looking in the Bible to find the answers to six essential questions about church. The first one we are going to look at today, very simply, is 'what is church?'

In the Bible, the word 'church' is a translation of the greek word 'ecclesia', which simply means 'gathering'. Church is a gathering of God's people. Through Jesus' death and resurrection we have been rescued from sin and brought in to our relationship with God, and with each other. Church is about people who have assembled in response to God's call. 'Ecclesia' is used to refer to both the universal church, the worldwide and all-time people that have been saved by God, and individual local congregations.

We use the word 'church' in many ways, but it is important that we understand that what Bible does and does not mean when it talks about church. Not once in the New Testament is the word church used to describe a building. It is a gift to have such a wonderful building to meet in for worship, it is beautiful, and holds many treasured memories, but there is nothing inherently special or holy about the building.

In the Old Testament, God's Spirit used to live in the temple in Jerusalem, but in the New Testament, we see that the fullness of God dwelt in his Son Jesus. And now, through him, his Spirit lives in us, the people of his church. The Holy Spirit lives in every individual believer, and when we gather together in the name of Jesus, God dwells among us, and we can experience his presence in a very special way. So the church is not a building, the church is the people, because that is where God's presence is.

Church is not a building, and neither is it a service. Church is not just something we do for an hour on a Sunday morning. The corporate worship of the church on Sundays is tremendously important, but church is not about where we go, or about what we do, *church is who we are*. That is why the last couple of months have been so difficult, not because our building has been closed, or because our services have been online, but because we cannot physically meet together.

However, even though we have not been able to physically gather together as the church, we haven't ceased to be the church. Church is more than a physical gathering of people, it's the people that have been gathered by God. The Bible uses lots of images to describe what the church is like, and they all convey an idea of closeness and connectedness with Christ and with each other. We are described as the building of God, the family of God, the body of Christ, and the bride of Christ. All these pictures show a spiritual intimacy with God, and with each other. While we are physically separated we are still spiritually connected. Just let that sink in for a moment... as you sit there right now, reading this today you are spiritually connected with the other members of St. Andrew's, and also with other Christians up and down this country, and all over the world. Through the Holy Spirit we even have union with those that are worshiping God with the angels in heaven.

Our separation is physical but not spiritual, and it is temporary not permanent; Church is eternal. A service may last an hour, a building (if it's got a good congregational committee) might last a couple hundred years, but the church will exist forever! We are in just such a strange moment in history right now, as a church we are physically separated from Christ (we can't see or touch him like the disciples), and physically separated from each other. Soon, God willing, we will be physically back together again. And one day we will be physically with each other, and with Christ, forever

Church is made up of people, not perfect people, just normal people. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor. People from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds. People with worries, doubts, and questions. People with illnesses, hurts, and grief. A community full of differences and struggles to overcome that have gathered together by the love of God, called to love one another.

For the last few weeks people keep asking me, 'When will church be open again?' But if we understand that church is about people, then the answer is that church has never been closed! From eden to eternity, God is constantly building his church. As we look forward to being back in our building worshiping together in person, we need to know that then, as much as now, and forever we are the church of Christ.

Closing Prayer

Father God,

We thank you that

we are no longer strangers,

but that now we belong in your family,

through Christ Jesus, our cornerstone.

Build us up together in him,

grow our love for each other

as we worship you.

Holy Spirit, come and dwell in us,

make us one, now and forever. Amen