

4 September 2011

Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 18:15-22

A year ago, many of us woke 4.30 in the morning, wondering what it was that had woken us – a very large passing truck, a strong gust of wind, the other person in the bed turning over rather violently? And then we realised that it was an earthquake, as the bed continued to move, the house to creak, and lights swung. That was the first earthquake, and since then the ground hasn't stopped moving in Christchurch.

That quake in September raised questions about buildings and land and what happens next, but of course it was the February 22 earthquake that really changed life forever for so many people.

And its impact is felt by us all in so many different ways – Les Green is going to talk about one of those ways later in the service when he gives us an update on our insurance. We have to look at questions about the level of cover we have for our buildings – many congregations in Christchurch are facing the bigger questions of how to repair or replace their buildings.

But underlying all of these questions is a deeper one, about our identity. What is the church? Who are we as church? What makes us 'church'?

In Matthew 18 we have one of only two occasions in all the gospels where the word for church *ekklesia* is used. (The other is in Matt 16 – where Jesus says to Peter “on this rock I will build my church”.<sup>1</sup>) What does its use here tell us about what the church is?

Firstly, the church is a community, characterised by conflict and reconciliation. Jesus is addressing the question of what to do about people within the community of faith who sin, who offend, who are at fault. Jesus knew that this happens, the early church knew this happens – this community called the church is a place where differences and disagreements and sin are present, and because they are present, they need to be addressed.

If we try to cover them up, or pretend they don't happen, or suggest that this particular community is not a 'real' church because of the difficult conflict within it, we are not living the Christian life as Jesus called us to live it.

Jesus says that when sin and conflict affect our fellowship, they are to be acknowledged and addressed, dealt with, in a way that seeks reconciliation.

The process Jesus laid out starts with honest communication between individuals, and then involves two or three, and then the final step fascinates me - “and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.”

A gentile and a tax collector – in the Jewish community of Jesus' day those were the categories for the outsider, the outcast, the people that good religious people avoided as much as possible.

But how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Well, Gentiles were among Jesus' first visitors, the wise ones from the East who came and worshiped him. Jesus himself was notorious for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.<sup>2</sup> And he warned the religious leaders that the tax collectors and sinners would be going first into the kingdom of heaven, because of their ready response to his message.<sup>3</sup> So, if the church is going to treat someone as a Gentile and a tax collector, it seems to me that they will be welcomed, and offered hospitality, and the gospel, the good news of God's love, will be shared with them, with an invitation to become followers of Jesus.

Is this the way we see the church? Is this the way we treat one another when we have been hurt or sinned against or offended? I know that all too often people won't talk to someone who has hurt them, but instead will talk about them, behind their backs, to anyone except the person who has offended them. It's easier to do that, much much easier not to go straight to someone you are upset with and ask to talk about it. But Jesus didn't say that following his way was going to be easy, did he? He said it would be about dying to self.

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1 Matthew 16:18

2 Matthew 9:10,11; 11:19

3 Matthew 21:31,32

And I know people often find it much easier to be hurt by the church and to walk away, rather than finding new ways of working together, better ways of communicating to avoid misunderstanding, and a readiness to allow grace to make space for forgiveness and reconciliation.

What is the church? Another thing that the Gospel reading says is that the church is where Jesus is present – where two or three gather in Jesus' name. Maybe even the same two or three who are willing to work together for reconciliation and honest communication. Matthew's gospel is framed by this idea of Jesus being with us – at the beginning we are told that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and Jesus' last word is “I am with you always”.

When we gather in Jesus' name, living as Jesus lived, treating one another as Jesus did, serving and loving and forgiving, we are the church and Jesus is there among us.

Coming to this table, eating this meal together, is part of being the church. It is obeying our Lord's command to do this in remembrance of him. And this meal links us with the history of God's dealings with humankind, through the people of Israel. When Jesus ate this meal with his disciples, they were celebrating the Passover, in accordance with the command given in Exodus - “You must celebrate this day as a religious festival to remind you of what I, the Lord, have done. Celebrate it for all time to come.”<sup>4</sup>

The Passover was to be (and continues to be for Jews) the annual reminder of God's saving actions, setting them free from slavery, bringing them out of Egypt, the land of bondage, into the land God had promised. This meal marked a new beginning – “this month is to be the first month of the year for you.”<sup>5</sup> And the character of the meal marked, shaped the character of the people who ate it: the urgency of the meal — the lamb roasted, the bread unleavened, the diners dressed for the road, leaving nothing but ashes behind in the morning — was a sign of the people's radical dependence on God.<sup>6</sup> They were not settled and secure, but ready to move when God said 'go'.

The meal was roast lamb and unleavened bread. Paul picked up these central elements of the Passover meal and reinterpreted them in 1 Cor.5 - Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch - as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.<sup>7</sup>

This meal is to shape us and mark us and make us into new people, a new community, just as the Passover marked the new beginning, a new identity, for the people of Israel. And as we eat this meal, Jesus is with us, the Passover lamb who saves us from death and opens the way to freedom. It is Jesus who invites us to eat the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth, so that it may nourish who we are.

We are the church – not this building, but the community of people who follow Jesus, who gather in his name, who practise ways of honesty and reconciliation.

Let us build a house where love can dwell,

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4 Exodus 12:14

5 Exodus 12:2

6 Bruce Epperly, <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yeara/2011-09-04/proper-18a>

7 I Corinthians 5:8