

What Church Is - 1

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The Alien and the Stranger

Luke 10³⁸⁻⁴² / James 2¹⁻¹³ /

What does the Church look like? How do you recognise the Church? I want us to ask this question for the next 4 weeks because though I think we may believe we have some pretty good answers it will serve us well this year to examine those answers and see if we've missed anything. I saw at least a picture of the church in Kolkata this January. It was in the form of a building where people met each day for prayer and work though it wasn't like any church building we might be familiar with. It was in a very old building which is in fact a factory. In that factory Christian and Hindu women who once had to service men night by night now work together in joy and dignity serving God. Though the Hindu women do not have to convert to work there they do witness and are part of a Christian service of worship each day. And perhaps what is most impressive is the joy in that place. The Church, I believe, is characterised by joy and not, I should add, because their lives are necessarily joyful. Rather there is joy there because they know a freedom they could not experience before. The Christian Church brings a freedom which results in joy.

As we begin our series on the nature of the Church I want to start this morning in a reasonably uncomfortable place by establishing from the outset that the Church is the place of rest and welcome not primarily for the believer but for the alien and the stranger. In other words the Church is the one place where those who **do not belong** or who are not 'locals' **should feel the most welcome**.

We find this indicated by Jesus throughout His ministry but perhaps one of the most poignant reminders comes when He is explaining the way God will reward His servants and He says of those welcomed into God's Presence

"³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you attended to me; I was in prison and you visited me..."
Matt 25

So the Church is recognised by God, no less, on the basis of **whom it welcomes** and it welcomes the alien and the stranger. Mother Theresa reflected this when she said this

...

"Like Jesus we belong to the world living not for ourselves but for others. The joy of the Lord is our strength."

If you think about it that saying is really quite radical because it implies that somehow we and the world are connected in a radical way and that this connection is the work of God. In my lifetime most preachers have wanted to work hardest to **distinguish** the church from the world. For Theresa God's work was the other way around. He wanted the Church to belong to the world – to see itself as constituted by its relationship with the world. Now that's a radical thought and we will need to work hard this morning to begin unwrapping it but I think we should do so and I'm going to use the context of today's reading to attempt it.

In today's passage we see this very same dynamic in the work of Christ but to see it clearly I want us to look beyond the interaction of Jesus with Martha even though this is important and ask some deeper questions – questions about the church, about what the church is and how it works.

Let me then begin with a summary of where I am going. It is my contention that the Church properly conceived combines three communities through the work of Christ. It is then the purpose of the gospel to properly unite these three in a harmony that is both creative and healing of all three. None have priority. All are fundamental to the mission of God. God gives the Gospel so that all might be healed in relationship with Him **and** with each other.

These communities are

1. The individual. It may sound strange to refer to the individual as a community but, in fact, the Bible reflects this view. As individuals we are body, soul and spirit and we operate, when whole, as a community of these three.
2. The community of the faithful. These are they who having received Jesus now follow Him in worship and prayer in the world. They are committed, careful, humble and obedient. They are often called the Church but they do not exist in isolation from the faith of the individual or the context of the third community.
3. The third community is the world; the world that Jesus came to love and to restore to Himself. The Church is not and was not the focus of Christ's mission – the world is. This is the world of the lost; the world of the stranger; the world of the hurting; the world of the alienated. Jesus said in John 3v16 ¹⁶ "For God so loved **the world** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

The Church is not complete without this world – without relating to this world – without working out its life within and with this world. Let us have a look at how this works out in our passage today.

³⁸**Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.**

We are introduced here to all three elements of God's love and mission and the person of Christ who binds these together – four in total.

First of all we have a 'they.' Who are 'they?' 'They' are the disciples – the fellowship of the faithful – those who follow Christ. Notice that no great fuss is made about them. Their presence is almost taken for granted. They are certainly not the centre of the story and, in fact, throughout the Gospels apart from special times of teaching and to demonstrate how wrong they can be the disciples are seldom the centre of attention. How different things can be today. How often we look upon ourselves, the gathered Church as the centre of action, the most important feature of the story. And there is no denying that God takes us seriously and that we have some important things to do. But we are not either the focus of God's mission nor are we an end in ourselves. The fact is the God's love is bigger than the Church and if it were not there would be no mission. We must never forget this as we journey with Christ. Our task is to serve the mission of God, not to dominate it.

Secondly, we have Christ. '**He** entered a certain village...' Christ initiates all mission. We follow. He is the centre of His mission then and now. He unites these three in a dynamic of love which is expressed as the mission of God.

Thirdly we have the world to which His mission is directed. He enters '**a certain village...**' So often we skip over this detail. It becomes the meaningless background in a story either about ourselves or about Jesus. But this is no meaningless detail here. That Christ is wandering about in these regions is a spectacular detail. He has not stayed in Jerusalem or even in Capernaum where He might have built a strong following without too many problems; where politically His future might have been assured. Rather He has chosen to visit the far-flung villages of Galilee where the poor are left despised and alone to cope with their poverty. He has not expected them to come to Jerusalem but He has gone to them and it is with and to them that He directs both His Presence and His Power. Without the village there is no mission. Without the village there are few miracles. Without the village there is literally nothing for Christ to do and without that there is no need of His followers. The village is not the least detail here. Rather it is almost the most important detail.

And there is a fourth character here. A woman named Martha greets Him. In almost all of the stories of Jesus there is another character. Sometimes it is a person such as Martha who is more clearly a disciple than not. Sometimes it is a disciple and often one who is being told of or perhaps taught. At other times it is most clearly not a disciple but it is someone from the context of the village; someone who knows Jesus only by Name or reputation; someone desperate for healing or to have someone they love healed. These are the individuals of God's mission; the sign that God does not deal with us as a group or even as part of a group but that His mission, His eye, His love **sees us**

individuals and values us as such. Individuals are a key part of the dynamic of God's and we forget this at our peril. If we cannot value people as individuals we have missed a key component of God's mission and we have forgotten how our Lord operated while on earth. Sometimes Jesus directed His whole mission towards the wishes of one individual. Sometimes He spent an inordinate amount of time with just one person. Often this was to the irritation and confusion of his own disciples. Send her away Jesus. What are you doing talking to her Jesus? Why are you blessing individual children Jesus? Almost always there is, in each story of Christ's life, an individual and a part of that ongoing story is, of course, that which concerns you and I.

You see God has done the same for all of us who find ourselves amongst God's faithful. We have had Jesus take a side road to meet us; a lonely road, a road to a village where we once lived apart from God. And Christ came on that lonely road to touch us, to speak gently to us, to coax us back to Him, to encourage us to be open again to God and His Word. And Jesus does this not once, not twice, not even three times but time and time and time again. He treads the lonely road for the alien and the stranger. For the ones and twos who count so much to God. The Kingdom of God is advanced one life at a time. Why? Because that's how important we are to God. And what is more, that's how much God wants us to value the individual next to us and not just next to us, but the ones we meet at work, on the bus, in class, in the library, wherever! This individual is a vital component of the mission of God because it is at the level of the individual that we find ourselves to be the alien and the stranger.

The truth is that we were all aliens and strangers to God at one point in our lives. Even we who were brought up in the Church have had to discover Jesus for ourselves and we do so not as insiders but as villagers to whom Christ has had to come a long way outside of the city to find us.

If we carry on with the story we discover that it is at this level, the level of the individual that the real work of mission is conducted but that this happens only in the context of the village and only because the Church acts together in this matter. Yes we could argue that this seems to be the work of Jesus and Him alone but in fact He has brought His disciples with Him and this must tell us something very important. It tells us that He does not want to work apart from the Church and that He will work powerfully when the church follows Him into the world.

It tells us something else as well. It tells us that when we are with Jesus we will find ourselves constantly in the company of the alien and the stranger – those far from God for it is to them that Jesus will go time and time again. So, if the Church is with Jesus... it will also be with the alien and the stranger.