

## **Church and Ecclesia**

Sermon by Silvia Purdie for Milson Combined Church, 26 July 2015

Readings: Deuteronomy 4: 9-20

Nehemiah 13:1-3

1 Corinthians 1:1-10

So, I've turned my 3-part sermon series into 4 parts. Sorry, you'll have to bear with me one more day with me raving on about the church.

But, hey, I figure that if we call ourselves a church and bother to turn up to church and give money and time to the church we had better know what kind of thing this is.

And for that I would like to tell the story of 'the church' right from its very beginnings, and focus particularly on two words – the word used for 'church' in the Bible, and the actual word 'church'. And along the way we will open up some of the hottest arguments through church history. I think it's a fascinating story, I hope you do too.

For this journey I think we need a time machine PHOTO

OK? Right, grab your seat belt! Our time travel is taking us back, back, 1,000, 2000, 3000 years, more ... another 500 years back, to roughly 1500 years before Jesus. Anyone want to guess at what significant Bible event happened then?

The Exodus. The beginnings of Israel as a people in covenant with Yahweh their God. This is the first time in the Bible when the word 'congregation' is used of them. In the wilderness they 'assemble', and they become a 'congregation', a people, as they discover themselves no longer slaves but God's people.

PHOTO: there they are, gathered at the foot of the volcano, Mt Sinai  
Let's hear this from Deuteronomy chapter 4. This is Moses's dying words to his people, as he stands within view of the Promised Land.

Deut 4: 9-20

This is the first 'Assembly'. From here this 'people' unfold their history in their land. The next thousand years bring countless battles, victories and defeats. They have kings, they build a Temple, but this is destroyed by the Babylonians, they are taken into exile ... and now we skip forward exactly 1000 years in our time machine ....

PHOTO

to 500 years before Jesus, to the day in which the people of Israel again assemble, this time under the leadership of one Nehemiah. They have rebuilt the wall, remade their home, Jerusalem. And they celebrate, dance and sing ... and they read out their story, recovered, probably the book of Deuteronomy in particular, just what we read before from Moses. Those very words were read out that day, and their story as a people.

Then this:

Nehemiah 13:1-3

Separation. Purity. Exclusion. On that day the people of Israel chose to be an Assembly closely defined. To be in the Assembly was to not be one of 'them' out there, outside the wall. From that day everyone who was not 'in' the people of God was Gentile, a dog ... 'out'.

But of course they still lived under foreign rule in their country, part of far bigger empires ... first the Persian, then the Greek, then the Roman. It was while the Greeks were in control that the Jewish Torah was translated into the Greek language.

So time machine again forward on 300 years ... Apparently the King of Egypt wanted the Jewish scriptures for his extensive library, so he invited 6 scholars from each of the 12 tribes and set them to work ... 72 translators. Hence the Greek Old Testament is called the LXX, Roman for 70, or in Greek the 'Septuagint'.

Now, the Hebrew word for 'Assembly' (or 'gathering' or 'Congregation') happened to be translated by two different Greek words, which meant pretty much the same thing. One word was 'synagogue' and the other was 'ecclesia'. Some of the 72 scholars used one word and some used the other. It didn't seem to matter.

So by Jesus' day Jews had 2 versions of their scriptures – the original Hebrew one, and the Greek one. Plus they all spoke Aramaic as well - 3 languages!

By Jesus' day, the word 'synagogue' had come to mean, as we know, the meeting of Jewish people for study, fellowship and worship in their home towns. This word is used often in the Gospels as the place where Jesus taught, and often got in trouble.

the other word used in the Septuagint for the gathering of the people of God, Ecclesia, is not used at all in the Gospels – well, almost. One major exception which I'll come back to later. By Jesus' day an 'ecclesia' meant a

civic gathering, when the people of the city assembled for some function or meeting.

Time for our Time machine again ... to the early church, meeting in people's homes ... this very early on was called an 'ecclesia', a gathering, an assembly. Ecclesia is the word which our Bibles translate as 'church'.

PHOTO: House church

Time now for our next Bible reading, the beginning of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 1:1-10

"To the church of God in Corinth"

It sounds straightforward but I'd like to explain, if I may, why this simple phrase is actually profoundly radical and has profound implications for all of human history including us here in Milson.

The 'assembly of God' ... Paul is writing to people who get together and meet face to face. And he is calling them an 'Assembly of God', an 'Ecclesia of Theos'. When he calls them this particular phrase he is quoting directly from the Hebrew scriptures in their Greek translation. For The Assembly of God was a title used throughout the Old Testament for the nation of Israel ... from their first gathering at the foot of Mt Sinai, throughout their long and complex history. They were the Assembly, they were the Ecclesia of the Lord, God's own people, chosen by Yahweh, brought into covenant, made holy by the blood of the Temple sacrifices.

And remember, they were only God's people by blood-line. Nehemiah's Wall was built to keep out people of foreign descent. You were only part of God's Assembly if you were born into it.

For Paul to call the bunch of people in Corinth The Ecclesia of God was scandalous, for they were a motley crew, some Jews, some Gentiles, some slaves some free.

For Paul to call them The Ecclesia of God was to make the outrageous claim that they as a small group were inheritors of a promise to which they were not entitled ... by birth or by education or by anything they had done or achieved. They simply 'were' the Ecclesia of God. Why ... because they were called by Jesus.

Here's what my 2<sup>nd</sup> cousin Paul Trebilco – professor of Biblical studies at Otago University – has to say about it:

"The point is that wherever believers met for fellowship and worship they were in direct continuity with the assembly of Israel. The crucial factor was

not size, or location, or ethnicity, but the fact that the assembly belonged to God. Each little group participated fully in being the 'gathering of God'. It was not incomplete, or in any way disadvantaged in comparison with the Old Testament people of Israel, just because it was small."

Each church, no matter how small or how diverse, was part of God's revelation, God's salvation and presence.

This is relevant to us, yes? We are a small church but we are just as important as the most magnificent cathedral or packed out stadium. When we gather together we are inheritors of the promise, partners to the covenant. Our value is not just our friendships and our words, for we are "The Ecclesia in Milson", just as much as The Ecclesia in Corinth that Paul wrote to, way back in the year 54.

One of the most outrageous statements ever made about the local Ecclesia is the theme message of international Christian leader Bill Hybells. His most famous one-liner is this:

"The local church is the hope of the world."

PHOTO

Actually, I happen to believe it. he is slamming up against the despair that many feel with declining congregations and loss of influence of the church in our society ...

The local church is the hope of the world. But why? Because when the local church stewards the message of Christ, it truly is the hope of the world.

Bill Hybells claims to the local church, in its changing forms, will outlive all other human institutions. He claims that the local church is the only form of human 'gathering' that has the power to transform society, to care for all members of society, to meet people's deepest needs.

"There is only one power on planet earth that can change the human heart  
It's us or it's lights out."

says Bill Hybells

For the apostle Paul 'ecclesia' also had another dimension. It was global as well as local:

"called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus"

The Local Church is the centre of the life of God, but it is not isolated and separated. Here at Milson we are not isolated and separated. We belong in not one but three different communions of sister churches throughout Aotearoa and the world. I know you puzzle at why I bother being involved in

our denominations; you'd probably rather I didn't. I choose to participate as fully as I can in the life of the wider church mainly because I feel that God calls me to, also that I enjoy making a contribution, also that I am often (though by no means always!) inspired and encouraged in my ministry. But also I do believe there is a Biblical call, through Paul himself, to acknowledge that the 'Ecclesia' is not just the local but together with all the saints, all Christian people.

Time machine – moving forward 300 years ... 312 Christian worship finally ceased to be **illegal** in the Roman Empire, and the church became established as an institution, and for the first time they built buildings specifically designed for Christian worship. These were Basilicas, similar to the civic halls of their day. They were called 'churches', literally 'The Lord's House', which in Greek was 'Kuriakon' ... which became the word 'Kirk' which continued in the European languages and became 'Church' in English.

So the Biblical word 'Ecclesia' which means the gathering of the Christian people for worship and fellowship became replaced by the word 'Church' which means both the building built for worship and fellowship, and the institution of the church with its hierarchies and power structures.

Back into our time machine ... now for an interesting twist. We find ourselves now in the year 1600, with King James authorizing an English translation of the Bible. But he had a list of conditions. Number 4 on his list was that the word 'Ecclesia' must be translated 'Church'. In fact the earliest (also illegal!) translation into English had used the word 'congregation', and this is actually a more accurate translation.

But do you see the significance of this word swap? Do you see that 'The Church' is not necessarily the same thing as 'the Ecclesia'. Do you see why the King of England wanted to reinforce the status of The Church (of which he was the Head!) by connecting it strongly into the Bible itself, and why he might have felt threatened by translating Ecclesia as an assembly or congregation?

The Church is an institution, a building, a formal body and entity. A local 'assembly' or congregation could be any gathering or assembly of people. Do you see the difference? ... it is a difference of power and control, about who's in charge.

It is also the difference between talking about this building as 'our church' and talking about ourselves as 'our church'. We're lucky here in Milson because our buildings are multi-use and this is more a hall than a sanctuary.

But the Christian faith has for much of its history been sucked into an idolatry of its own buildings, sacred objects and sacred traditions, which can easily become the focus of our worship more than the living God. It takes us right back to Deuteronomy 4, and one of the first things that God asked of his people, to not make for themselves idols, to not worship anything they can create and control.

To conclude, a summary of what I'm saying this morning:

1. our little fellowship here is in direct continuity with the very first Assembly of God's people at the foot of Mt Sinai 3,500 years ago. We are inheritors of the promise and the covenant, the salvation and the blessing.
2. the words we use to describe ourselves have power. Today I have talked about one particular word 'Assembly', how important it is in the Bible, and how Paul used it to break down the walls between people. Paul talks to us as much as he did to his churches 2000 years ago, inviting our Assembly to be fully inclusive of all people called by the Lord Jesus Christ, overcoming all barriers that society throws up between people. We are the hope of the world!
3. I talked about how over the centuries the focus shifted from the people assembled to the buildings and institution of this thing called The Church. I warn that The Church has struggled with the basic temptation to worship itself. We too here in Milson need to guard against idolatry; may nothing that we do or own compete with our loyalty to the crucified and risen Christ. So, we commit to our work and our fellowship and our worship, but we try not to take ourselves too seriously!