

“... around Christ ...”

Introduction

MeChurch video. [1:30]

We said last time that the Church is “the gathering of God’s people”. But what kind of gathering? If two Christians happen to meet in the aisles of the supermarket, they’ve “gathered”, but have they just become a church?

Gathering around Christ (not the *Tim-Tams* on special) is the key thing. Throughout Scripture ‘gathering around God’ is equal to being his people.

- And you’ve been seeing that in your seminars, with “gathering” and “scattering”, haven’t you?

Now last talk we made a big deal about gathering together and real community, real relationships. But this gathering and community is not just horizontal, it’s also vertical.

- We gather with God (!), and we have real communion/fellowship with God (!). Wow!
- That we, a sinful people, can draw near to God and come into his presence is an astonishing thing. Not to be taken for granted.

Yesterday we also saw — just briefly — that we are *united with Christ* by faith, and so we are already gathered together, with God, in a heavenly / spiritual way.

We want to think about this more today. Our gathering around Christ. And there’s so many places we could go. There are so many great metaphors and parables and pictures that have been given to us in the Bible to help us understand this wonderful gathering called “church”.

Now we’re not going to have time to have a look at them all. We’re going to look at two in detail.

- And what I want you to see is that the church belongs to Christ, is gathered around Christ, and is all about Christ.

1. God's Flock

The first passage we're going to look at is John 10, which was read to us. And here's the context:

- in John's gospel so far Jesus has been teaching the people with his words, and at the same time he's been doing wonderful signs and miracles, that are all pointing towards God, his Father.
- Many people are deciding to follow him / gather around him. But inevitably, there are also those who are coming into conflict with Jesus. And chief among those are the Pharisees, who were Jewish leaders at the time.

In the parable Jesus is deliberately contrasting his leadership with that of the Pharisees.

John 10

¹ "Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

This is not the first time God and his people have been pictured as a shepherd with his sheep. That image already had a long history with the Jewish people in the OT.

- The patriarchs called God their shepherd.
- Ps 23 'the LORD is my shepherd'
- God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel against the corrupt leadership of his day, and God promised that he himself would come to be a good shepherd over his people.

Jesus takes this metaphor, and contrasts thieves/robbers/strangers on the one hand, with the shepherd on the other.

Note the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd:

- The shepherd knows each sheep by name (v3). Impossible with the way we farm sheep on huge properties here in Australia. But in Palestine in Jesus' day each shepherd would have a much smaller flock and would literally know each individual sheep. It speaks of Jesus knowing us individually, intimately. It's a lovely picture.
- The sheep, for their part, listen to his voice (v3) and follow him (v4). Christians come to know the voice of Jesus the longer they follow him. Each of you—if you are a Christian—have heard his voice and recognised the shepherd; and so you followed.

Russian man. Guards threw his Bible out the train window.

Weeks later a knock at his door: a man saying he wants to know more about this Jesus.

What had happened? He had been walking along beside the train-tracks. This book suddenly hit him in the head! He read it, and became convinced that this was the truth.

There was a name and address in the front of the Bible. And now he wanted to become a Christian.

There is a man who recognised the voice of the shepherd!

John 10

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

The contrast continues.

- The teachers who have come before Jesus (= the Pharisees and other religious leaders) are thieves and robbers. Just like the terrible leaders that Ezekiel warned about.
- Jesus, on the other hand, is the good shepherd; and (mixing his metaphors) he is also the gate (v9).

Image of Palestinian sheep pen explaining the overlapping metaphors.

- The thieves and robbers steal and kill and destroy.
- But Jesus has come to save the sheep, and give them life to the full. How so?

John 10

~~11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.~~

Jesus tells us how he saves the sheep, how he can promise them life to the full: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

And he's straining the metaphor here. I mean: a good shepherd may *risk* his life for the sheep. (In the OT a young David says that he fought the lion and the bear to protect the flock of sheep under his care.) But to actually die in place of the sheep? That's taking it a bit far, isn't it?

Jesus, of course, is alluding to what he knows is coming: his death on the cross to save sinners.

- The death that will give birth to the Church.
- The death that allows us to gather around a holy God.

John 10

14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

Jesus looks even further ahead in v16—beyond his death and resurrection—and speaks about other sheep that are not of this sheep pen.

- He is speaking about Gentiles [people who are not Jewish] also being brought into God's church.

- At the moment he is ministering among the Jewish people. But God has always planned to bring the Gentiles in as well. (You've seen that in your seminars with the promises given to Abraham.)

These Gentiles will also recognise the voice of the Shepherd; just as the Jewish Christians have.

- And there will be one flock and one shepherd.
- We saw this yesterday, didn't we? Ultimately there is only one church, the universal church. And it is made up of people from every nation. → CU & FOCUS.

Now before we move on to the next passage, can you see how central Jesus is to the Church?

- He is the good shepherd.
- He knows us. And loves us. So much he gives his life for us!
- He speaks to us. And we hear his voice, recognise it, and learn to trust it.
- We follow him wherever he takes us. Even when the path looks rocky or dangerous, we have learned to trust because He is the shepherd and we are the sheep.

“The church is the gathering of God's people *around Christ...*”

2. God's Temple

We're going to look at a second picture of the church now, from 1 Peter chapter 2. And again, I want you to see that when we think about the Church it's all about Jesus.

I saw a student wearing a t-shirt — a very honest t-shirt — that said “It is all about me. Deal with it.”

Funny t-shirt. Terrible worldview.

The reality, of course, is that everything — the church, the entire universe, and all history — is about Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

The picture that the apostle Peter uses here is a very different one to the shepherd and the sheep.

Let's read it. ___

1 Peter 2

⁴ As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For in Scripture it says:

*“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame.”*

⁷ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

*“The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”*

⁸ and,

*“A stone that causes people to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.”*

They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Peter's picture of the church here is like a building; or a Temple to be specific.

And when he thinks about this Temple he takes us first of all to a special stone in the foundation, the first stone laid in the ground. They call it the cornerstone.

Pictures of cornerstone:

1

2

3

What do we learn about this cornerstone?

- This cornerstone, of course, is Jesus himself. The church is founded on Christ.
- He was rejected by human beings.
- But in God's eyes is chosen and precious.
- He is the cornerstone, which means this whole Temple is based around him / built around him. He is the foundation. Every other stone (you and me) is lined up alongside him. We are “gathered around him”, you might say.

So here is the new Temple of God.

- We Christians are not looking forward to a rebuilding of a physical Temple in Jerusalem in the Middle East. Completely irrelevant.
- The new temple is already being built! It is ‘a spiritual house’ that is being built as each person comes to Christ and is lined up alongside him.
- This is the Temple — the church — in which God lives. People! You and me and Christians everywhere!

And so it really is all about Jesus. What we make of him determines everything else.

Please note how binary it is.

- There is a group of people who trust in Jesus. And they will never be put to shame (v6). That's wonderful, isn't it?
- But there are others who reject Jesus. And God says they will stumble and fall (v7-8).

It's all about Jesus. He's at the centre.

And the church, which is all based around Jesus, begins to look like Jesus! We take on some of his characteristics!

- He is the living Stone. → And we are living stones! (v5)

- He was rejected by the world, but vindicated by God. → And many of us too will find ourselves rejected by the world. But fear not: God will vindicate his people.
- Jesus is our High Priest who offered the perfect sacrifice for sin. → And we are ‘a holy priesthood’ (v5) who offer up ‘spiritual sacrifices’.

What *are* these spiritual sacrifices that we offer?

- They can’t be sacrifices for sin. That’s been done by Jesus.
- v9 helps us. There Peter says ‘you are a ... priesthood ... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light’.
- Our praise of God is our sacrifice.

What does it mean to ‘praise God’?

- Normally we think ‘praising God’ = singing. Sure, that’s one great way to praise God ... as long as the words are good.
- Because praise needs content.

eg Helen is a great wife. Why? Loves me and persists with me, sharp mind, compassionate heart, raising our kids beautifully, etc.
- So praising God means telling others why God is so excellent.
- And especially for saving us.

1 Peter 2

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The church exists to bring praise and glory to God.

- We praise God to one another within the church.
- And we also praise him to a listening world, about the difference that he has made in our lives.

So, I hope you can see in this second picture of the church:

- Again, Jesus is at the centre. It's all about him.
- We are gathered around him, and in some ways become like him!
- The purpose of the church is that we might praise God both inside and outside the church.
- We also do this in the hope that our hearers will decide to make Jesus #1 as well, and so join his church, and the building will get one more brick in the wall and it will grow!

And having said that, let me say that in a group this size there may be some here who have not yet placed Jesus at the centre of their life. And if that's you, I want to say 2 things:

- I'm so glad that you are here.
- But you need to make Jesus your #1. Until you do you that you haven't grasped what life is all about: it is all about Jesus. And also, until you do that you are heading for disaster ('stumbling and falling').

If that's you, and you know you need to do something about it, please speak to a close Christian friend or one of the staff here this week.

I can't think of a better time to become a part of God's church than this week!

Take a breath.

We've seen how central Jesus is in two metaphors so far:

- a) God's flock → Jesus is the good shepherd
- b) God's temple → Jesus is the cornerstone

We don't have time to chase them, but just think with me briefly about some of the other big metaphors we have for the church in the NT:

- c) The body of Christ → Jesus is the head
- d) The bride of Christ → Jesus is our husband

e) The vine → Jesus is the vine, we are the branches

Here's the conclusion: It's all about Jesus!

“The church is the gathering of God's people *around Christ*”.

What difference does this make?

Well, if we are gathering around something other than Jesus, then it's not church.

And sadly, this happens all too often.

a) Gathering around something other than Jesus

Let me share with you what I noticed with a house church one of my friends went to years ago.

She felt disillusioned by the “established church” that we were both a part of. Helen and I were a bit worried about her when she joined this house church, and so we visited this them on a couple of occasions.

And it seemed to me that what they were really gathered around was their *shared rejection of mainstream churches*. They spoke about Jesus. But their eyes really lit up when they were bagging “established churches”. That's what they were passionate about, and what really brought them together.

And this corrupt centre was sadly shown to be true in what happened to my friend there. Heresies were taught, and embraced because the “established church” wouldn't like it. Godliness was lacking. And my friend limped out of there years later very hurt.

Thankfully, in God's grace, she's held on to Jesus and is going much better now.

There's one example: gathering around a rejection of mainstream churches.

But there would be other things we might gather around, that would have subtly shifted Jesus to the side.

- A particular “worship experience”?

- A “social network”?

If anything has displaced Jesus from the centre, and we’re gathering around that thing instead, then we’re no longer a church, are we? Because we’re not gathered around Christ.

b) Gathering around a pirated Jesus

Pirates are not cool, friends. I’ve said it. We’re not afraid to embrace controversy here.

Some of you think pirates are cool. But they’re not.

Exhibit A — Look at the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. The first film was alright, but after that...

Exhibit B — Pirates vs Ninjas? Please! It’s not even a competition. Ninjas are going to own the pirates.

Exhibit C — Pirated DVDs don’t work. You’ve been there, in the holiday house of your best friend’s auntie, and you open up the TV cabinet and there they are: pirated DVDs. They look like the real deal; but they don’t deliver. Halfway through — usually just as the most exciting part — they start skipping and you realise they’re not going to go the distance.

So too with pirated Jesuses. They don’t go the distance.

It isn’t rocket science: If you don’t have the true Jesus then you’re not gathering around Jesus, are you?

Don’t fall for these common pirated Jesuses.

Jehovah’s Witnesses:

- They say Jesus isn’t God. That’s he’s an angel or something.
- They say that when Jesus came back to life he had no body.

That’s not Jesus. Don’t settle for a cheap imitation!

Mormons:

- They say that Jesus is a god, but separate God to the Father.

- They say that there can be many gods, and that you too can become a god.
- They say that Jesus' death cannot remove sins.

That's not Jesus. Don't settle for a cheap imitation!

Judaism:

- Please pray for Jewish people, because Jesus is their King!
- Sadly though, most Jewish people have rejected him.
- They don't believe that we are saved through Jesus' death and resurrection.
- In fact they say that Jesus was just a man, and a false prophet who was leading people astray.

That's not Jesus. Don't settle for a cheap imitation!

Islam:

- They say that they follow Jesus.
- They say, though, that Jesus was a prophet, nothing more.
- They say he isn't God's Son, and that he didn't die on the cross.

That's not Jesus. Don't settle for a cheap imitation!

Baha'i:

- They say that all religions are one and all are true.
- They say that God has appeared to humans at many stages through history. God came as Buddha, as Jesus, as Mohammad, and most recently as Baha'u'llah in Iran in 1863, who founded the Baha'i religion.

That's not Jesus. Don't settle for a cheap imitation!

Catholicism:

- Now friends, I realise that what I'm about to say is going to be uncomfortable for some of us. Even grouping Roman Catholicism with these other groups may seem offensive.

- But we need to make sure we're gathering around the true Jesus.
 - There are 2 ways that we can distort Jesus. One is by saying things about him that aren't true. Like the JW's...
 - The other way is by taking things that rightly only belong to Jesus and giving them to others.
- And so I'm going to mention two things: Mary and indulgences.
- The official teaching about Mary, the mother of Jesus, is so confused in Catholicism that she is stealing glory from Jesus, and pushing him to the side.
 - They say that Mary was born without sin, and remained sinless throughout her life.
 - They say that Mary is "co-redeemer" with Jesus.
 - They say that Mary was taken up into heaven at the end of her life.
 - The upshot of all this is that Mary is adored and even worshipped. (Ask Karen about her time in Spain.)
 - Many Roman Catholics feel that they would much rather go to Mary than Jesus when needing help. If you look at Catholic art, you will see Jesus often pictured in two ways: either as a baby (pointing to Mary) or as a corpse. Which one can help you: the baby or the dead man? The implication for many is that it's much better to pray to Mary.
- And then there's the false gospel of indulgences.
 - This year is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation that led to Protestants leaving Catholicism. One of the things that made people like Martin Luther protest was the Catholic idea of "indulgences".
 - This is the false idea that there is a collection of "excess good works" that the pope could distribute to people. Apparently, Jesus' death was so powerful that there was extra "merit" left over. And the saints lived such perfect lives on earth that they not only earned their own way to heaven, they even had extra good works left over that they didn't need.

- You can access some of their good works and credit it to your account by doing certain things. It might be a pilgrimage, a special prayer, or donating money.
- This is a terrible false gospel, and it steals glory from Christ. For the punishment for our sin is removed by Jesus' death alone, not by receiving an indulgence from the pope.
- And just so you don't think this is a problem from 500 years ago, it's still going on today. In 2013 the Pope offered an indulgence to people who followed his Twitter account during the *World Youth Day* in Brazil that year.
- If Jesus' finished work on the cross isn't the way our punishment for sin is dealt with — reading the pope's blog is — then we are not talking about the same Jesus.
- Now let me be clear: I do believe that some Catholics are Christian. I do. But here's the thing: they are Christian not because of Roman Catholicism but in spite of it.

So if you are a Roman Catholic then you need to look into this. I know it's hard because that's where your family goes, and all of that. But the official teaching of Catholicism has a very different Jesus. Don't settle for a cheap imitation!

An excellent way to do this would be to read the short book we have on the bookstall: *Nothing in my hand I bring*.

And if you have family or friends who are Roman Catholic — as I do — then I'm sorry if I've offended you. But I would rather offend you and help you to see that Catholicism is not the same as Christianity so that you will be praying for and sharing the gospel with your Catholic friends.

c) Gathering around me and my needs

Well we've seen the danger of gathering around something other than Christ, or gathering around a pirated Christ. But the final point is much more subtle and therefore much more dangerous for most of us here; and we need to be on our guard against it.

We started the talk with that video of “Me-church: where it’s all about you”. And it’s funny and over the top. But it can also be very close to the truth.

- There is a very real danger that we gather with the church, but actually in our hearts it’s all about us.

Brothers, sisters, we are not the centre. Jesus is.

- He’s not following us; we’re following him.
- So be careful.

I worry about us when we:

- approach church as consumers. We want to know what *we’re* going to get out of it.
- We’re tempted to move churches if the sermons are too long, or too short, or not entertaining enough.
- We’re tempted to move churches because the “worship experience” is better down the road.
- Or it’s what I spoke about yesterday: our lukewarm attendance. We can be so quick to make excuses to ourselves about why we don’t need to meet with our church this week.
 - So if we want to gather this Sunday, we will.
 - But there’s something else we’d rather be doing this weekend, then we’ll do that.

It’s really hard for us to not fall into this trap because we live in a culture where the individual is king, and also a culture where entertainment is seen as a right and a need. Yeah?

- To not have Netflix or fast internet access seems like serious deprivation to us.
- And we can carry this consumerist mentality over into our spiritual life.

If church is all about us, and our needs, our wants, our desires → then we're gathering around ourselves.

And that's not church. That's idolatry.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for Jesus, the good shepherd who has laid down his life for us, the sheep.

For Jesus, the cornerstone which forms the foundation for everything else that church is and does.

Lord, we confess that at times we have made church more about ourselves and less about Him.

Please forgive us. And help us, by your Spirit, to centre our lives and our churches around your Son alone.

To him be the glory, we pray,

Amen.