

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, February 21, 2010
Rev. John Tapscott

"WHAT IS THE CHURCH HERE FOR?"

A member of a church was surprised at something he saw as he walked toward the church on a summer Sunday morning. One young man was standing on the shoulders of another and peering through the open sanctuary window. The church member stopped and asked what they were doing. "Oh, nothing bad," the one at the window replied as he looked down, almost throwing his burdened companion off balance. "We heard music coming out the window and we were wondering what goes on in there. We've never been in a place like this."

Unwittingly perhaps, he summed up the situation of many people today. They've never been in a church, and would never come in by the front door, yet they wonder what the church is, what it does, and what it stands for. Now we do not stand on the outside of the church looking in; we are on the inside. This is the day of our annual congregational meeting. It's a chance to review and reflect on congregational life over the past year. We also propose and approve plans for the year ahead and beyond. And in order to do that wisely, I think it's good for us to think about these questions. "What is the church here for? What is it all about?" Our readings for today (Deuteronomy 26:1-11 & Romans 10:8-13) passages help to answer this question.

First, the church is here to worship God and witness to Him.

The sign outside one church read, "Worship is our business." Well, the prime business of every church is to worship God. In Deuteronomy Moses instructed the people how they were to worship God in the promised land. "You shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land the LORD your God is giving you...you shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the Lord your God....you shall celebrate the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you..."

"Praise God from who all blessings flow" - that's what we are here for- to worship and praise and give thanks to God, whether there are 2 or 3 here or 2 or 300. Now the word worship means to ascribe ultimate worth. And here we proclaim that God alone is worthy of ultimate honour and praise.

Worshipping God is really a very subversive act. For everyone ascribes ultimate worth to something - power, status, money, success, comfort, education, political

ideology. All these things have their place, of course. But when we worship we say "NO" to all the lesser gods and idols that crowd our lives, and we say "YES" to the true and living God, the only One who is worthy of the highest place in our lives and our world. Whatever else the world gives ultimate worth to, here we give ultimate worth and honour and glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who lives and reigns now and forever.

Moses told the Hebrews that as they worshipped they were to remember and recite God's mighty works on their behalf. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation...When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us... we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction... The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deuteronomy 26:1,2)

In our worship we too recall and recite God's mighty works, including those God did for Israel. What God did for them was done for us too since it set the stage for the coming of Israel's greatest Son. And we recall **that** mighty saving act of God in many ways, especially at the communion table, and whenever we recite the apostles creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who became incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, on the third day he rose again." In worship we proclaim what God has done, what he is doing now and what he has promised to us for the future. We proclaim the mighty acts of God.

The church is also here as a witness to God. This church, even when it is empty, stands here as a silent witness to the reality of God. In the midst of a secular world, the church reminds people of the God who made them and cares for them and seeks them in love.

In one city there was a church with a long history. The neighbourhood changed, people moved away, and the dwindling membership could no longer keep it going. The church was sold and torn down to make way for a condominium building. Then people noticed that the shape of the church building was clearly visible in silhouette on the side of the towering office building beside it. Over the years the church had shielded that part of the building from the sun's rays and the city's pollution, and left a mark. Some saw this as a parable for the witness and influence of the church in the city over the years.

Of course, no one but God knows exactly what the future holds for our church or for any church. But we can rejoice in the good influence this church has had for years and continues to have on this village and its people. Our ongoing worship and witness to God here is vitally important, more important perhaps than we can possibly know. The church is here in this community to worship the living God and to be a witness to Him.

The church is also here to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

Let's start with the second part. The church exists to afflict the comfortable. You know, it's easy for God's people to become quite comfortable with our situation, to become preoccupied with our personal ambitions and successes, to forget our duties as followers of Jesus, to fall asleep to the power of evil. The church seeks to be the conscience of society, but its' influence must begin right here, among God's people. The world won't listen to the church if we are not seen acting in accord with our words. So the church proclaims God's word which exposes individual and corporate sin. The church calls God's people to repent, to receive God's grace and walk in the way of Jesus. The church holds up people and places of need in the community and the world. The church empowers us to work for God's justice and God's righteousness with the gifts God has given us. The church calls us to recognize and resist evil. as Jesus did, and to overcome evil with good. The church calls us to take our stand with God on the victory side. For God has already won the victory through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ! The church exists to afflict the comfortable, to prick our spiritual conscience, and to move us into active ministry for Christ's sake.

But the church also comforts the afflicted. Every pastor knows the heavy and often unseen and discouraging burdens people carry. I often think of the words God spoke to Isaiah, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God." So I am a preacher of comfort. This pulpit and this church, offers people the comfort of the living God in Jesus Christ. We proclaim the Christ who willingly takes our burdens upon himself, the Christ who offers strength for every need and forgiveness for our sin, the Christ who gives hope for this life and the life to come, the Christ who walks with us as our Master and Friend. There is no greater comfort a preacher can offer to a congregation than the precious Name of Jesus! "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear."

Some time ago, a couple I didn't know came to our church one Sunday morning. At the door they shook my hand and generously thanked me for the service. "That meant so much to us", they said, "that was so helpful. We lost our daughter last week." I could see the tears and also the gratitude on their faces. I almost cried along with them. They had come seeking the comfort of God and

received it through something that was said or done here that morning. Never think worship doesn't matter. Worship matters a great deal, because God works through the act of worship not only to afflict the comfortable but to comfort the afflicted. You know, people out there may not know much about the church or the faith. But they sense that the church is a place where they may find comfort and hope in the midst of trouble. And that's why churches, even though they go up and down in popularity, tend to stick around for quite a while, longer than many other institutions. For humans always need comfort, and where else can people consistently find the comfort of God other than in this place, in this corporate act of worship?

Finally, the church is here to preach the Gospel and make disciples for Christ.

Paul declares, "We preach Christ," and that is the heart of the church's message. Paul tells us "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved." Yes, it's the Holy Spirit who brings us to believe with our hearts and to confess with our lips. But the Holy Spirit works through the word of faith we proclaim - Christ incarnate, crucified and Risen. Now preachers seek to do many things through preaching - encourage, instruct, afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted. But every sermon, whatever else it attempts to do, must make reference to God's saving work in Christ and must somehow lead people to Christ. Preaching invites those without faith to believe the Gospel. Preaching seeks to strengthen and confirm the faith of those who already believe. "For no one who believes in Him will be put to shame."

And it is mainly, though not exclusively, in the church, that people hear the proclamation of Christ. Yes, many people hear the Gospel preached on TV. Many TV evangelists have success in leading people to faith for the first time and strengthening the faith of believers. But it's harder for them to do another thing Christ commands the church to do - "Go and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you..." You see, to be a disciple means to be more than a solitary believer. A disciple is one who actively follows Christ and learns from Christ in fellowship with other believers. It's hard to actively follow Jesus alone and from a couch. The church exists to provide a loving community where people learn to obey of Christ, supporting and encouraging and comforting one another, and together reaching out to serve our neighbours. The church is here to proclaim the saving Gospel and to make disciples for Christ. Today let us remember the indispensable role of the church in our lives and in our community. May God help us to open doors so that many may receive the encouragement, the comfort, the challenge, and the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.