

**Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!**

**Produced by Rev Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church**

**The text below can also be heard in audio version at <https://chalmersmemorialchurch2020.podbean.com/>**

**It will also be available to listen to for one week from Sunday 5th July 2020 via telephone. The number to dial is 01875 444 495.**

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020 – “What is the Church?” (1) – “People!”**

**Introduction**

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison, Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church. Before I say anything else at this time I want to place on record my sincere thanks to Tom Gordon for his two very special and uplifting podcasts over the last couple of weeks which he prepared to give me a break from work. It was much appreciated.

Towards the end of my break I began to think about what my focus would be in these podcasts over the coming weeks. Usually, if we were in our own building, I would normally be starting a new series of sermons or thoughts and that is what I intend to do this week and for the next four weeks after this.

But what will that series of thoughts be about?

Well, it seems to me – and we’ve all said it during lockdown (haven’t we?) – that we have been learning to be church in a new way. Lockdown has taught us how to survive without our buildings, even though we miss them. We’ve had to think out of the box... change our way of working. Even now that lockdown is easing, we’re definitely not back to where we were in the middle of March.

Many, if not most, church buildings remain closed for the time being, despite the First Minister allowing them to be open for limited numbers. We, of course, understand the reason for that. The latest set of guidelines from the Church of Scotland are now in their third edition already and have expanded from 41 pages when they were first issued to 57 pages in their latest incarnation.

In them are risk assessments and details of how to clean our buildings as well as guidelines about what we will be able to do and what we will not be able to do come the day that those church doors open.

We also have, over and above that, to make sure that when we do open again that people have the confidence to come along. We’ve been reading many stories in the news in recent days about people – and perhaps some of us are amongst them - who have not found the easing of restrictions as straightforward as they thought they would be. Apprehension is still there and understandably so.

So, we take time... and we take time to talk to each other. I am sure we will know when the right time to unlock those doors will be and it will be a decision we make together.

In the meantime, the same set of guidelines that tells us about how we might open our church buildings also asks us to think on this one question before we turn those keys in the locks... the question being: “*What is the Church?*”

To help us answer that question I am going to be taking a different verse each week from the Hymn that can be found in the Church Hymn Book (no 204 if you want to look it up) entitled "*I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the church together*".

This week we explore the significance of the first verse of that hymn which goes, "*The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people*".

But more of that in a moment. First of all, though, shall we pray?

**Let us pray...**

### **Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer**

Lord God, in the quiet of this time and the peace of our dwelling places, we would call to mind that you are humbly and invisibly present in the life of the world and with us in and through and under all our experience of living.

You are the beyond in the midst, the other who meets us on the way, the kindly light that draws us to each other.

You are the love that underpins all human loving, the love that bears all things, endures all things and hopes all things, the love that never gives up on us and refuses to let us go.

This we know through Him who is your way of being in the world, Jesus from Nazareth, the man for others who would lead us to that abundant life, which is your purpose for all of our living,

So, we would fix our eyes on Him. We would again immerse ourselves in His story, so that the story of who we are cannot be told apart from His influence upon our lives, and the story of who we may yet become as we open ourselves to His creative, life giving spirit.

Dwell with us today. Guide our thoughts and our worship that today we may sense you and having sensed you go on to serve you in deeper ways.

Hear us now as we bring these our prayers in the words of the Lord's prayer saying:

*Our Father*

*who art in heaven*

*Hallowed be thy name*

*Thy kingdom come*

*Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power*

*and the glory, for ever, Amen.*

### **Bible Reading – Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 22**

**Our Bible reading this week is taken from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the Church at Ephesus reading verses 11 to 22. This week it will be read to us by Mary Gordon.**

*11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (which is done in the body by human hands) – 12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you, who once were far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

*14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

*19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

**Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.**

### Reflection

**Thank you to Mary for sharing that reading with us.**

Tony Morgan is a so called “*Church Consultant*” based in the United States. He helps and advises Churches on developing new ways of being, as well as helping new fellowships establish themselves in an often crowded marketplace.

I only recently heard of him, so I don’t know much about his work but something he wrote in a blog post on the internet not that long ago grabbed my interest.

The post was entitled, “*Does the Church need a building?*” (<https://tonymorganlive.com/2010/02/14/does-the-church-need-a-building/>) It’s not a long article and in it he tells of a recent visit (pre Covid 19) to Western Africa, to some remote communities that to all intent and purposes seemed quite cut off from the rest of the world.

The poverty he saw was immense. It challenged him to his core. He saw how the people struggled with harvesting their crops and supplying for the basic needs of their people.

He had gone to meet with local church leaders and was surprised with their enthusiasm, not just for the gospel, but also for some of the new church buildings that they had begun placing in their communities. These church leaders, he writes, showed him the trees under which God’s people had once worshipped in the open. They took him to the buildings made of mud bricks which had replaced that outdoor setting before showing him their latest building – the style and stature of which was superior to any other building in the area.

For a moment he was challenged, and not in a positive way. All around him he saw poverty and struggle. The sight of a modern church building seemed incongruous at best and, at worst, a downright waste of resources.

Had they forgotten, he even pondered, that this was not how most churches had historically come into being...? Such churches had met in small rooms... homes and more homes, perhaps even renting a hall... and all that before any bricks and mortar are laid.

So he asked them “*Why the buildings?*” to which the answer came that other faith groups in their communities had started to build places of worship and when they did, the buildings always filled up, regardless of what the physical needs of the people were.

To become more present in their community the Church needed a focal point where people could gather and, as they opened, these buildings too became full... and so more buildings were put up in different places.

Tony Morgan concluded that he had forgotten that the first rule of understanding how to grow your church was to be aware the culture in which it was placed. In reality, these church leaders were responding to the requests of the people themselves. They knew their community better than he gave them credit for - even if he had advised dozens of other fellowships, over the years, to keep things simple.

And we can understand why he would have advised some fellowships to keep things as simple as they could. Buildings are not always a blessing. Buildings cost money – to heat, to maintain. Buildings have to be painted... and plumbing has to be sorted... and windows and doors will have to be replaced, eventually.

The standards that people accepted in a bygone age will not be accepted now. In a former congregation of which I was minister one member commented that she remembered bumping her baby’s pram up some narrow steps in a dark and winding corridor at the church hall to get to the young mothers’ group. That was how things worked in those days, she said. No one ever really thought of making corridors that were even to walk upon or doorways that young mums could actually push their buggies through.

So, buildings can be a problem – depending on which way you look at them. But still we build them... and still we occupy them pretty much for the same reason that the church leaders that Tony Morgan met in Western Africa built them – to make the church a visible reality and presence within the community we seek to serve.

They serve as a visual reminder that God is worshipped and known by the people who use those buildings. We use them, too, as a way of welcoming people – if not to our homes at least to God’s house, a place where we can help people grow in faith and mark the events of life’s journey.

They are where we meet our friends and sing and share fellowship.

They are where we comfort and encourage and where, oftentimes, the ambience helps us to draw closer to God – reassured by a stained glassed window, a stencil, a carving, a sense of history that draws us back to the “*Communion of Saints*” who went before us and who occupied those hallowed walls before we did.

I wonder, if you noticed however, that in what I have been saying so far that the main focus of a Church building has little to do with the building itself.

It’s how we make that building work for the gospel that really matters, isn’t it?

It’s about the people made of flesh and blood who walk within its walls rather than bricks or stones...

It’s about fellowship... about inclusion... about welcoming rather than isolation and exclusion.

The doors say, "*Come in – All are welcome in this place*"

This is why I chose the passage of scripture that Mary read to us earlier on from Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 11 to 22.

Now last week, Tom spoke to us about another wonderful passage from Paul's letter to the Church at Ephesus, at chapter 6, where Paul encourages us, using the example of the Roman Soldier, to put on the "*the belt of truth... the breastplate of righteousness... the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation*"

There Paul is at his most memorable, exploring faith by using visual images that were wrought from daily experiences such as, in his day, the sight of a Roman Soldier.

In our reading today, however, Paul's words are not always so easy to grasp. We're on quite technical and tricky ground here as Paul explores the difference that Jesus made to the way in which we understand our relationship with God and also to our understanding of what it means to be the people of God.

Let me explain...

If you want to find out more about Paul's relationship with the Church at Ephesus you can find that in the book of Acts at chapters 19 and 20. Ephesus is on the coast of what we now call Turkey and, in the third of his great missionary journeys – the third of his great outreaches to the Greek and Roman world – Paul spends at least three years building up this fledgling church. That is, of course, until – as Paul often had to do – that he beat a hasty retreat due to complaints from the locals about Paul's attempt to turn people away from the Greek and Roman Culture that so influenced their society.

In Ephesus, for example, you would have found a Temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis, a daughter of Zeus himself. It was a quite resplendent temple. It was also where a man called Demetrius (whom we read about in Acts chapter 19), plied his trade selling silver shrines to the goddess herself. Perhaps, if he had been about now, he might have plied his trade selling models of the Eiffel Tower in Paris or of the leaning tower of Pisa in Italy.

Anyway – before I digress too much – Demetrius is not a happy person at all because, as Paul teaches the people of Ephesus - and the more people come to faith in Jesus Christ - the more difficult he finds it to keep his business going. These new Christians don't want to buy his silver shrines and so Demetrius stirs up a huge protest that leads to Paul fleeing the city.

For Demetrius the issue focuses on the challenge to his own culture and his unwillingness to let any of that change. Change is not good for business. He reckons Ephesus to be pretty much about gods and goddesses and if folk can't – or won't cope with that - then they can always go somewhere else. You were, to Demetrius and his cohorts, either in or you were out!

Now it wasn't only from the likes of Demetrius, in his defence of Greco Roman culture, that Paul found resistance from. They were not the only ones who didn't want to change their ways nor let others in too easily. Simply put, Paul found it from amongst the Jewish community too, the very Jewish community that he – Paul – had, off course, once defended so much but whom he now is trying to introduce to the reality of his Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ himself.

This is why the opening words of our reading speak to us clearly about how, in the past, men who wanted to join in the Jewish community had to undergo circumcision to be recognised as a Jew. Circumcision was a sign of joining that faith community. It was a clear and identifiable way to be recognised as being Jewish.

If you wanted to be part of the promises of God's covenant, then you had do the right thing to benefit from them whereas Paul was actually trying to tell them that God had gone even further.

In other words, whatever once they marked by what they did to their bodies, Christ Jesus has gone one step further. On that cross and in his resurrection, says Paul, Jesus has opened a door that brings Jews and Gentiles together... that casts division aside... breaks down wall... smashes barriers of pride and prejudice to smithereens... so that, as he puts it at verse 22 of our reading, we can know (and here I quote) that we *"are being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit"*

This is how, Paul says in the verse before that, verse 21, God builds his people to become a *"Holy Temple"* ... a *"building"* joined together by human voices and human hands.

This is how God builds his diverse people together with Christ as the very cornerstone.

It is said that when the great Methodist leader John Wesley found himself responding to those who opposed him in the church that he responded with these words, *"Give me your hand (said Wesley). I do not mean, 'Be of my opinion.' You need not: I do not expect it or desire it. Neither do I mean I will be of your opinion. I cannot. Keep your opinion; I mine; and that as steadily as ever. You need not endeavour to come over to me or bring me to you. Only (he said) give me your hand..."*

When we give each other our hands... when we hold hands God will build his people into a Temple... a building made of a diverse humanity which will be powered and sustained by the very Spirit of God himself in whom Christ dwells.

**Let us pray.**

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, we thank you today for the life and fellowship of your people and all it means for the way we live our lives,

As we bear each other's burdens and share each other's joys we thank you that, despite our frailty and our sometimes weak hold on you, we have confidence in the gospel that nothing can destroy or undermine the reality of your love for us. So, hear us now as we pray for others.

We remember those who are isolated, alone, rejected or unsettled. We pray that they may come to know friendship with others, and a deeper communion with you.

We think of those who are victims of cruelty and violence, casualties of war praying that they may come to experience peace with justice and a life without fear.

We pray for those who find it hard to overcome the barriers placed before them as we pray too for those who build barriers between people... who distinguish between someone's worth on the basis of their beliefs and manner of living.

Remind us all of the Christ who came to bring people together and who builds his Church when people – in all their diversity – learn to join hands together.

Hear us then as we bring these our prayers to you in Jesus' name, Amen.

### **Benediction**

*We end this time of worship no longer as strangers, but as members of God's own family, brothers and sisters through the blood of Jesus Christ. Together, we are being built into a holy dwelling place where God lives by the Spirit. So may God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – bless our togetherness this day and forever, Amen.*