

# Church: A Global People

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## Sermon

MAIN POINT: **God is present in His Church, in all time and space.**

### Intro

This morning we're going to go a journey through space and time. No, unfortunately I'm not the new time Time Lord, and my Tardis is currently in for its 100 million mile service. We can however go through space and time from God's perspective, as found in the Older and Newer Testaments. As we travel together I'm going to keep asking a question: "Where is God?"

Let's pray ...

### Eden and Babel

Our travel begins, of course, at the start. In Eden. God saw all that he had made and was more than satisfied. More importantly, God and the woman and man were in right relationship. It was all "very good". 5 star ratings all the way on TripAdvisor. "Where is God?" Walking in the cool of the evening, just over there.

But then, sin slithers in, infects the couple and Adam and Eve fall. Humankind are ejected from the garden, as they were no longer holy. We still feel the pain of this today. Where is God now? Out of reach.

Soon mankind adapts, develops, and becomes pleased with itself. So pleased with its new powers and technologies, that they decide to make a name for themselves, build a great city, and a tower that reached up to heaven. God saw was not pleased, as they were trying to set themselves up in his place. A people to be worshipped. "Genesis 11:9 (NRSV) Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." From this came competition and tribalism, and a lack of understanding. We still feel this today, everytime we see the news. Today there are as many as 7,000 different languages .

### But OT hints to non-Jews

And then God chose Abram, a man aged 99. God said to him that he was to worship the one true God alone, and that God would make him the father of a multitude of nations. His wife was barren and laughed. But what God says always comes to pass, and Isaac is born, the first of a number of miraculous births in the Bible, each heralding a very significant new act of God.

Soon Abraham and Sarah's family is growing and has become at least two nations, one of which came to be known as Israel. Their adventures (and many misadventures) with God occupy most of the rest of the OT. In their wanderings, and in their settlements, one thing was fixed. The answer to the question "Where is God?". He literally dwelt in the middle of them, in the Most Holy Place in the middle of the Tent of Meeting or the Temple. They felt special living so close to the one true God. But Israel were prone to forget that they weren't *chosen* because they *were special*. They were *special* because they were *chosen* by God, and they had a job to do. They were to be a model to the other nations showing how "(Micah 6.8 NRSV) to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." God sent them prophets, like Isaiah, to give them a nudge, but they didn't get it:

Isaiah 56:6-8 (NLT) 6 "I will also bless the foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord, who serve him and love his name, who worship him ... 7 I will bring them to my holy mountain of Jerusalem and will fill them with joy in my house of prayer. ... 8 For the Sovereign Lord ... says: I will bring others, too, besides my people Israel."

There it is: the other nations will come close and be joyful in the presence of the Lord. This theme about the other Gentile nations is there in the OT, but it isn't dominant.

### **Jesus makes it clearer**

Enter Jesus, who quickly draws much more attention to this theme, this underlying plan of God. One day when standing with the money changers in one of the outer courts of the Jerusalem Temple, the one known as the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus quoted this very passage, and then He upturned their tables. He was making a stand for right worship, worship that includes both the poor and the Gentiles.

Jesus makes it clearer still when he goes off the Jewish reservation. Not by accident does he find himself in Samaritan lands, as we read in our Gospel passage (John 4). The woman at the well, realising he's a knowledgeable Jew, quickly raises the dispute between their two tribes. The Samaritans argued that Mt Gerizim was the only possible home for the Temple, and that's where they worshipped. "Where is God?" For the Jews the answer still had to be Jerusalem. But Jesus takes issue with both answers. "21 ... Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." In this Jesus broke at least two boundaries, talking with a woman and treating a Samaritan as equal to a Jew.

Later he mystifies his disciples by saying that in just 3 days He would destroy the Temple and rebuild it – with hindsight we now know he was talking about himself and his crucifixion.

Story: visiting holy land, and the sites around Jerusalem and Galilee. I found a quiet spot in a Church not far from the Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount – very holy places to Jews and Muslims. I was very grateful to go; but more grateful that I didn't have to.

Our passage from Ephesians 2 explains in more detail what Jesus was doing:

(Eph 2 MSG) 14 The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall

we used to keep each other at a distance. 15 He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody. 16 Christ brought us together through his death on the Cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility.

This makes me praise God: I no longer have to be on the Jewish holy mountain to meet and know Him; no longer do I have to be a Jew. That ancient animosity is broken. All tribalism should cease, at least for the Christian.

Application: A colleague of mine lives in Muswell Hill, London, and reports that “near where [he lives] is a sizeable Cypriot community: some are Greek Cypriots, and others Turkish Cypriots. The tensions run deep. If we had two non-Christian enquirers, one from each community, would we put them in the same [Alpha group]? My hunch is that we might not; racial hatred is only one of the many sins that need to be repented of at conversion. But as they emerge from the baptism waters, they should embrace each other, one in Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Global in time as well as space**

It is perhaps a besetting sin of our age that we forget the past, and so ignore its store of wisdom. Perhaps it's inevitable when the rate of change in how we live our lives is fast and only accelerating, that we can't manage the past let alone the present. We've seen that God is not limited to certain spaces or places. But neither is he limited to certain times. He is as much God of Christians in the ages past, as He is of the generations yet to come. Our customs and language evolve, but God is still God of past, present and future. Unfortunately I've always found it tricky to learn from people in the future. But at Andrew's urging, I'm discovering the value of reading the reflections of godly Christian men and women from the past.

Application: One of the difficult things that our PCC thinks about is this building that we meet in. It's challenging dealing with a listed 500 year building. But here is a principle to help us. As our God is the God of the past, present and future, we should aim to honour the past; make the building fit for God's purposes in the present; and to safeguard it for the future. Easier said than done, of course, but we will go wrong if we care just about the past or the present or the future.

### **Diversity of Churches**

So we come to the title of this sermon: “Church: is a Global People”. In the last few weeks we heard how the Church is a Telling people, responding to Jesus' Great Commission. “Go into all nations ...” The apostles responded and quickly took the Good News of Jesus with them out to Gentile cities in Turkey, and into Asia, Europe and Africa. Despite easy transportation and spread of the internet, it hasn't yet reached to “the ends of the earth”. That's because there are still over 2,000 of those 7,000 languages which don't yet have the New Testament in their mother tongue. This is why Martha and I support the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators, who are working hard to produce Gospels and NTs in those remaining languages.

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<sup>1</sup>Chris Green, *The Message of the Church*, p.49

We also find in the early church a concern for the work of mission in other cities or nations, and support given. I'm delighted that as a church we take an interest in and pray for Christian mission workers in Chile, in Nepal, in India and in Pakistan. Some of you have visited our Christian brothers and sisters there, and I'm delighted to say Ram Prasad will be with us again briefly in October. Being involved like this helps us realise the global nature of God's people, and that our ways of worshipping aren't the only possible ways. It reminds us that the Bible says very little about what we are to do when we gather together, or how to do it. (Indeed the main command is from Jesus in John 4 to "worship in Spirit and in Truth".) Do take opportunities to meet and worship with Christians from other cultures when you can. It will enrich your heart and faith. There is something very special about finding and feeling that connection with Christian brothers and sisters, even if we don't understand their language well. That feeling can be even closer than with our own blood relatives. It should be no surprise, because we are in Christ, together, part of his global household of faith. Adopted children of the same heavenly Father. A sign that Babel will be reversed.

Later in the service we will as usual pray the Lord's Prayer together. It joins us to Christians across space (and time). This morning, as a sign of that, please say it in whatever language you are most comfortable with, your heart language.

### **Church buildings**

So back to my question: Where is God now? God doesn't dwell here; this isn't a holy building; when John Deacon or Mike Ward come here faithfully each night at 5pm to lock up, they're not shutting God in. No! Wouldn't that be a terrible thing if were true. This building is still important though: it *creates* a space *we set aside* to honour God, and to serve our community. We will refuse to allow worship of other gods here: not the Muslim god, nor mammon. This is a place for Christians to gather, and a visible reminder to those who see it that God is still amongst us. Among us as we gather here to praise God together. But with us just as much as we go from here equipped with His Holy Spirit to our homes, schools, workplaces, to worship God through the whole of our lives.

### **Conclusion**

We've traced the story of God and his peoples, and how He is saving people from all lands, both Jews and Gentiles, just as he intended.

We've seen how God has worked through his church of old, and how we mustn't ignore them, or cause problems for future generations.

We've seen how we can no longer support any racial supremacy; or in other ways feel superior to other Christians.

We've been encouraged to get involved with Christians from other lands, and to support Bible translation into other languages.

Most of all, I hope we're thankful that we have been included in God's gathered church, global in time and space. Amen.