

What is Church?

Sermon for Saint Paul's, on our last day, 15th August 2010

Does it bother you when people use words wrong? Like, for example, someone saying “when people use words wrong.” It’s *wrongly*. Saying *wrong* when you mean *wrongly* is just plain wrong.

Here we have the English language at our command. Among the languages of the world, English is one of the most nuanced languages on earth. We are blessed with a language that has never been too proud to borrow words from other languages. So, when it comes to expressing an idea, English gives us so many options.

We don’t just have to say, *The new church building is BIG*. We have so many shades of big-ness about which to speak.

We could say *the new church building is large*. Or massive. Or we could say it has ample dimensions. Or that it is spacious. Or monumental. Or whopping. Or grandiose. Or megalithic (but technically, it would have to be made of stone to be megalithic). Or we could say it is Herculean, or Brobdingnagian.

Each of these ways of describing big-ness is slightly different. Each conveys a different nuance about size.

Now the insightful among you will have realised after enduring this catalogue of sermons I have delivered at Saint Paul’s, that I like words. In fact, I want to let you into a little secret. I’d like to show you my favourite book.

Now, I know I should say that my favourite book is the Bible. That would be the politically correct thing to say from up here, but it’s time for truth. Let me show you my favourite book.

You can see that it has been well used. And indeed, it has also been used well. One of my children has even decorated some of the pages along the way.

This is my copy of Roget’s Thesaurus. I think it is one of the most interesting books about the English language you can buy. I bought this one in 1972 from the Queensland Book Depot for \$2.25.

This is the book you need if you want another word for *big* and you’d like to use something exotic like Brobdingnagian. In case it will distract you for the rest of the sermon, Brobdingnab was the country in Gulliver’s Travels where everything was of a gigantic size (except unfortunately, for Gulliver).

Now I am able to tell you this, not because I am a polymath (a person who knows lots of stuff), but I can tell you this because I looked it up. After first, finding Brobdingnabian in my Roget’s Thesaurus and wondering what it meant.

So I come back to words and their meaning.

Sometimes words have different meanings depending on where you are. Take, for example, the word *momentarily*. According to my schooling *momentarily* means FOR a moment. As in, *The flame flickered momentarily and then was gone.*

But when I went to America I discovered that there it does not mean FOR a moment. It means IN a moment. An American shop assistant would say *I'll be with you momentarily*. And I was thinking, *Well I don't want your attention FOR just a moment. I want it for a few minutes at least.*

And, of course, words have different meanings depending on how old you are. Take, for example, the word *sick*. To my generation this means *unwell*. And *fully sick* would probably require one to call an ambulance. Yet, young people seem to be enjoying things that are *fully sick* without a hint of nausea.

My father taught me the meaning of the word *tool*. He would call a hammer a tool, or a spanner a tool, but I don't recall him ever calling a person a tool. But that's how the language grows and changes. A hammer doesn't have enough brains to know it's being used. Nor does a tool.

So, with all this contemplation of words and their meanings rattling around us, let's look at the meaning of a very important word for us today.

The word I want to examine is CHURCH.

What is CHURCH? What does the word really mean? And what are the ways we use it.

We drive past Saint Paul's on Dorset Road and we say "There's my church."

Yet, there is a subtle difference in meaning between the sentence "I'm going to church" and "I'm going to THE church."

"I'm going to church" seems to refer to what happens IN the building. "I'm going to church" implies an activity. Something that we do. That we call *church*. To be clear, we should probably say "I am going to the worship in the church."

But, some of you are ahead of me already and you want me to say that really the church is the people inside.

Did you do this thing when you were a kid? *Here is the church, here is the steeple, look inside and there are the people.*

Yes, sometimes when we say church we mean the people. We say we are members of a church. We don't mean the building. And we don't mean the worship service. We mean the body of Christ who happen to meet at a place that is called church.

So we use the word CHURCH in at least these three ways. Church is a building. Church is that activity that goes on in the building—the worship activity. And church is the people who meet there for that activity.

Now I should point out that this three-way meaning is not unique to CHURCH. It's true of many organisations. We could equally think about the word BANK. A Bank can be a building. Bank can be an activity, the activity of doing banking. Like, we say, *I'm going to BANK this cheque*. And a bank can also be all the people who work there.

But wait a minute, I want us to note something. Banks have changed.

My first job after school was at the National Bank. We didn't call it the NAB then. I joined the Bank. And every place I worked, and every place you could do banking, was a building. A building with the words National Bank written in large letters on the outside.

But today? Well I do most of my banking online. And I still BANK my money, even though I don't go near the Bank building. In fact, there are banks like ING that appear to have no buildings at all. At least none you can visit to do the activity of banking. If you have an ING Internet Banking account, the ONLY way you can do the activity of banking is through the Internet.

And all this leads me to today's proposition. Once upon a time we used to locate these three ideas of banking in one central place. A building. A building called a BANK.

In the same way, we located our three ideas of CHURCH – the building, the activity of worship, and the people—in one central place. A building. A building called a CHURCH.

But as banks have changed, is church changing too?

Well, I think it is. Indeed, I think it must.

I'd like to tell you about just a few of my experiences of church from my travels. I have a collection of 9 passports at home. Eight expired ones. They are all those big ones. 65 pages. All full of visas. These passports are a record of the 40 or so countries of the world I have been lucky enough to visit over the years since my first trip 32 years ago.

And, often, when I travelled I went to church. That is, I engaged in the activity of worship. Often I did it with others. Other members of the body of Christ. Other church-members. And sometimes, even, I did it in a building that was called a church. But, whether it was with the body of Christ, or whether it was IN a church, it was still CHURCH. It was still the activity of the church, the worship activity of the church.

I do remember looking in the Copenhagen guide book for an English language church service when I was attending the United Nations Summit on Global Development in Denmark. I saw there was an English language service at the Anglican church at 8am. So I went.

When I got there, 5 minutes before the appointed hour, the doors were shut. I thought I had got the time wrong, but with about a minute before the hour, an old lady came along with a large key and we went in to find the priest waiting for us, off to one side of the old church.

The church was cold, and so was the priest.

The service was simply the service of Holy Communion and it was conducted by the priest in its entirety, along with the old lady swinging incense and ringing bells at appropriate moments, and me following her lead to know when to kneel and when to sit. There were no hymns. There was no-one to play the organ. Well, little did they know. And the whole service was conducted for this congregation of me. Just me. The old lady. And the priest.

Was that church? Well, yes, it was.

I've been to quite a few interesting church buildings in which I participated in quite interesting forms of worship.

...

In a Romanian Orthodox church the main priest guided me around while the service unfolded, taking me here and there so I would get the best view, and explaining things to me loudly in English as if not being able to speak Romanian had made me deaf. Was that church? Well, yes, I suppose it was.

...

In South Africa, some friends asked me to accompany them to church in Soweto. This was in the time after Mandela had been released but was yet to become President. So these friends, who perhaps I should explain were black Africans, squeezed me into the back of their car and we went to Soweto.

We worshipped in a hall that might have also been a school room during the week. It didn't look much like a church, but they did have a raised section at the front. There was lots of loud singing without any accompaniment at all. Even if I had offered to play, there was nothing to play.

Things went along in a relatively familiar vein for a while. Some songs I knew. Some I didn't. A Bible Reading. Some announcements. At least I think they were announcements. Not sure what language all this was in, but it wasn't one I knew.

Then a large lady hoisted herself onto the platform and began to pray. I knew it was a prayer because after each sentence, everyone around me said A-men. At least A-men seems to be more or less the same in most languages.

The large lady started her prayer with a soft voice. Almost a whisper. And then, slowly, slowly, she upped the volume. Each sentence prayer slightly louder and more emotional than the one before. Louder and louder. Higher and higher. Until she was screaming each sentence at the top of her voice and her huge body was shaking so much it looked like it was going to take a week for the after-tremors to stop. She may not have been Brobdingnabian, but she was pretty big.

Just when I thought her eyes were going to pop out, and my ears were going to be shredded, she came off the top of this emotional mountain and began a steady slide down the slopes until she was finally whispering a last prayer. And we all said, A-men.

What an experience. Was that church? Absolutely. Was it IN a church? Sort of.

...

One of my first trips was to Seoul in South Korea. I was there to work out the arrangements for a tour of Australia by the World Vision Korean Children's' Choir. They were coming out for the International Year of the Child. When was that? 1979 maybe.

Soon after we arrived in Seoul we were taken to the music school. And there, in one of their practice rooms, the Korean Children's Choir gave us an impromptu concert. Now this is a world-class choir. And I don't know if you've ever heard a choir singing in a small room. But, well, it is wonderful.

They sang a short program of mostly Christian songs, and finished off with *Waltzing Matilda* just for effect.

I was transported. It felt like I was in heaven. I was surrounded by small angels.

Now, the question is, was that church?

...

Melk Abbey is a beautiful Baroque church in the town of Melk on the Danube River about an hour's drive west of Vienna. Every day of the year, hundreds of tourists came through the abbey to see the amazing rooms with their amazing art.

Most tourists finish in the chapel which is perhaps the most magnificent room of them all.

Judy and I visited Melk Abbey three or four times with various friends who had dropped into see us when we were living in Vienna.

On one week day we arrived in the chapel just as the sounds of beautiful unaccompanied singing began. We looked up to the choir stalls for the choir thinking we had arrived in time for a mid-week service, but the choir seats were empty. Where was this heavenly music coming from? They were singing something vaguely familiar. *Panus Angelicus* or something like it. But where were they?

And then we saw them. With their backpacks slung over their shoulders. In their jeans, sneakers and travelling jackets. Just a bunch of tourists. Standing among the pews. In a rough circle. With one young woman unobtrusively conducting.

We discovered that lots of choirs, amateur and professional, like to do these sorts of tours. They visit the churches of Europe to see the sights and to sample the sounds. To hear their voices echoing around the acoustics of ancient churches.

When they finished their song, we all applauded, but the tour group simply melted away into the tourist throng again.

It was an unforgettable, uplifting experience. There was certainly something transcendental about it.

Was that church?

...

My job in Vienna was to lead World Vision's work in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. World Vision had work in about 15 countries, and offices in ten. Each of these offices was led by a National Director and most of these National Directors were Americans, Australians and Western Europeans of one sort or another.

One of our challenges was supporting these directors and their families. Leadership of a national office could be a lonely role for a foreigner. So, a few of times each year I would find a way for all the leaders to meet together in a central place. We would share our difficulties, hopes, and struggles. And we would learn from one another. We would pray and sing and reflect on God's word together. We would go away refreshed and renewed for doing our little part of God's mission in the world.

Was that church?

...

And in between the times we all got together, I would visit each program individually. We would go and visit projects that World Vision was supporting.

In Belarus, we'd meet people who were dealing with the after-effects of Chernobyl. Children there had 7 times the rate of thyroid cancer compared to the rest of Europe.

In Georgia and Armenia, we'd meet people who were establishing tiny home-based industries because a micro-finance program had been set up by World Vision.

In Palestine, we'd meet people who were developing a hydroponic vegetable farm so that Palestinians living in locked-up Gaza could have affordable fresh vegetables.

Was this church?

...

One thing these experiences suggest to me is that the idea of church as a building, is a pretty flexible notion. The original and if you want to be pedantic, the accurate meaning of the word *church* IS the House of the Lord.

The word *church* comes from a Greek phrase that means House of the Lord. And, in most languages it's pronounced with a *k* not a *ch*. The Scots call it a kirk. The Germans say *kirche*. The French say *eglise* but then they're French aren't they?

So while the first, primary meaning of the word church is a *house*, indeed the house of the *Lord*. It's pretty clear that the house can be any kind of place that the activities of the church happen.

It can be a bluestone Gothic cathedral, a school assembly hall, the lounge room of a private home, the board room of an office, or even in the shade of a Moreton Bay Fig Tree. All these, and more, can become the House of the Lord, can become a church.

And what makes such places into a church?

Two things. Our two other meanings. First, it becomes a church when the people of the church assemble there. And second, it becomes a church when the work or activity of the church happens there.

Now, as I said, we tend to use church to describe all three things. The building, the activity and the people.

It's really our fault for mixing these things up under one heading, because it wasn't always this way. There are two perfectly good words for the activity and the people.

The activity of the church can be called *worship* or *mission*. And the people of the church can be called the *ecclesia*. Ecclesia just means the ones who are summoned together. It used to be the name for the Assembly of the People in Athens, but the word was taken over by the Christian Church to describe the people of the church coming together to do worship or mission.

But we don't hear the word *ecclesia* much in the 21st century. And although we do hear *worship* or *mission* quite often, most of us prefer the shorthand of calling all of these things church.

So we have seen that the church as the House of the Lord can be any kind of place, or structure, or non-structure. But let's also look at the nature of the activity of the church—the church in worship or mission.

You know, Jesus apparently had the habit of going to the regular worship service at the local synagogue. It said so in our Gospel reading today. Luke Chapter 4 verse 16 says "on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom." Jesus had the habit of going to church. By that I mean "going to church" in the narrowest sense of the phrase. He had the habit of going to the worship service that was held in the building at a specific time on a specific day.

But it is clear from what Jesus does in this synagogue that he sees his mission or activity as something rather broader than just turning up the 10 o'clock service. Jesus is asked to read from the Bible. And he chooses a passage from Isaiah. He says:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

This is Jesus stating his mission in the world. And, in case we miss the point, he is stating the mission for his church. The mission for the people of the church.

In answer to the question, *What is church?* Jesus is saying it is

Preaching good news to the poor;

Proclaiming freedom for prisoners;

Recovery of sight for the blind;

Release for the oppressed, and;

Proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour.

I believe that anywhere we see the church doing this kind of work, everywhere that Christians get together to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to prisoners, to recover the sight of the blind, to release oppressed people, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour – wherever Christians do this work, there is church.

And not just the mission of the church, but actual worship. This work is no mere response to God. We don't just say, because God loves me, I will love others (although that's a good thing to say, of course). But we are saying more. We are saying that these acts of love and compassion are themselves worship of God.

When asked to define worship, the Old Testament prophet Micah put it this way. "What God is looking for in men and women is quite simple," Micah says, "Do what is fair and just to your neighbour. Be compassionate and loyal in your love, and don't take yourself too seriously—instead take God seriously."

And James, writing to the Christian churches in the New Testament says "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

So what is Church?

I am led to the conclusion that church is a place, any place, where Christians assemble to do the work of the church.

There's not much evidence that Jesus and the disciples spent a lot of time singing, or sitting in pews. The 12 disciples didn't appear to have a keyboard among them. Not even a guitar as far as I can tell from the Scriptures.

No, mostly what the church that Jesus established was doing was acts of compassion and love, and personal reflection that keeps us close to God and safe from the evil that surrounds us in the world. Now, I'm not suggesting therefore that we shouldn't come together to do what are doing this morning. Jesus went to church too. Maybe he even sang a hymn or two. I'd like to think so.

What I am saying is that the church is more than this. More than 8am/10am Sunday morning.

Church for Saint Paul's in Boronia is more than this. Church for us is youth camp. Church is Kidzworks. Church is Thursday night's free meal. Church is playgroup. Church is even a Christmas in July dinner.

All of this is church.

...

Over in Preston there's an old shirt factory. The sewing machines have long gone and the work outsourced to China and the building put up for sale. The people of four churches in the Northcote-

Preston area decided they would sell all their properties and buy the factory and turn it into Northcote Community Church of Christ.

If you enter the front of the building (call it church if you like), the front is an op shop. Sourcing and selling good quality used clothing to people who can't afford to shop in the High Street. The Op Shop is church.

If you pass through the Op Shop you'll come to some administrative offices and a couple of counselling rooms. Here people can get help with the issues of life. This is church too.

Further inside is a large hall. Most days of the week, a free meal is served from a commercial-grade kitchen to local people who can't afford the cost of a week's food. The café is church too.

I looked around and said to the Senior Pastor, "where's your church?"

He replied, "Well this is all church, actually. But I think you mean do we have a worship centre?"

I said, "Yes, that is what I meant. Where do you hold your church services?" Of course I had walked into a semantic trap again with the phrase *church services*. And the Minister picked me up on it again.

"All this is the service of the church," the senior Minister replied, grinning at me. "But on Sunday for an hour, we fold back that wall over in the corner. There's a communion table and a cross on the wall behind there. And we do the Sunday worship thing."

In some respects, Saint Paul's seems to be going down this road. I think it is the right way.

But something even more radical is happening over in Preston.

On Tuesday night they have a worship service. People gather. They share the news of the week. They listen to a talk and then discuss it. They may have a song, accompanied by a guitarist. They open a bottle of Shiraz, break a loaf of bread, and celebrate Holy Communion.

Nothing too radical about that, I suppose. Except one thing. It's in a café in the middle of the shopping centre. Most stay on to have a meal together. They call it Café Church.

Like us, this church has a number of playgroups. About half of them are held away from the old factory.

I asked the Senior Pastor what he thought was the biggest challenge faced by the congregation in moving from a church-building centric model to this church in community model.

He said that it wasn't too hard to break down the walls of the church and move activities out into the community. But the hardest thing for the church people had been moving away from the idea that Sunday morning worship in the church building was the end goal of all church activity.

"We used to run playgroups with the idea that it would bring the young mums and kids into our Sunday worship. But then we realised that God was saying that playgroup IS worship."

This realisation changed the way they thought about the activity of the church. No longer was it about getting people to come in the doors. No longer was it about bums on seats on Sunday morning. No longer could success be measured by all the traditional measures that churches record. How many people coming for communion? How many attending a worship service? How many confirmations?

The big challenge that this church faces now is convincing head office that they would like to be measured not so much by these traditional measures, but by how much the Kingdom of God is revealed in their community.

Saint Paul's is embarking on a new building program. This is a good thing. But something more radical is happening here. It's called Kid's Hope. It's not going to happen IN the church building: It's going to happen at the local Primary school. It's not aimed at bringing kids into the church building: it's aimed at being a friend and a mentor to a child. It's not about bringing kids to church: it's about bringing the church to kids.

Church is changing. Thank God for that.

A-men.