

Are we there yet?

1 Kings 8:22-30, Ephesians 2:19-22, 3:14-19

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How many people are in your household? One, two, three, four, five, or more? Probably not. We no longer seem to have the extended families we used to have. A home with grandmother, grandfather, maybe one or two uncles or aunts, is a thing of the past. Although I remember from my childhood that we had a basic family of 7 increasing occasionally to 8 or 9. But it is simply not the done thing anymore in our modern western societies. However, there are still countries where it is the normal way of life.

Certainly, at the time of the Letter to the Ephesians, its readers would have known exactly what the writer meant when he referred to 'the household of God'. They were used to large and mixed households with several generations, servants and sometimes even some animals all living under the same roof. They could follow the ideas expressed in the letter even though the writer, of course, was talking metaphorically about the early church and about the tensions within it between the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. And as he did so, he painted 3 marvelous pictures of the church which were full of meaning, one of them being *'the household of God'*. A few weeks ago our Lectionary guided us to another part of the letter to the Ephesians, when we have already heard some important points about how the early Christians understood their calling as God's newly gathered communities. Today's OT Lectionary reading takes us further back into the story of our spiritual ancestry, to the glorious days of Israel, when King Solomon built the first Temple. In its second picture of the Church the Ephesian Letter picks up the idea of a holy Temple and then proceeds to a third concluding picture and we will look at these three pictures to reflect upon our church life in the 21st century.

Firstly, as we've heard before the church is being likened to a household. At its best the household has a nice warm, comfortable feel about it. It is a place where you are nurtured and your everyday needs are taken care of, where you come to relax and rest, where you can be yourself, where they accept you as you are and love you as you are. Where you can feel safe. In a household everyone knows their place. They rely on each other and because of the close

proximity they learn to get on with each other. There is usually a sharing of basic tasks and the available living space. Then there is the Head of the household. In first century Palestine this was invariably the man of the house, of course, who would rule his household with a loving but strong hand keeping everyone happy together.

Is our church anything like this? Do we feel comfortable within these walls? Are we familiar with all the other members of the household? In a former church I attended, the minister did a daring thing during a service. He made two members of the congregation from opposite ends of the sanctuary to stand up and asked them if they knew each other. It turned out that they just about knew each other by sight, but didn't know anything else about each other, not even their names. Can this happen in our congregation, I wonder?

And we can go further down the list. Do we all share in the common tasks, or are we happy to leave things to others, who would, perhaps deserve a bit of rest after years of service in a particular area? Do we feel accepted and loved and safe in our fellowship and are we willing to accept and love our fellow Christians here? And what about our relationship with the Head of the household? How does God fit into our church life? When we say God is love, does that mean that all our actions are guided by the concept of love? Do we actually leave room for this loving God in our decision making? Do we dare to rely on the constant presence of God's spirit in our everyday life? Having sat through lots of church meetings in my time, having listened to endless worried discussions about church finances, the future of ministry, the church's outreach, or the lack of it to young people - I sometimes wonder if we really take it seriously that God is the Head of our household.

Well, lovely as the picture may be, I think it is quite difficult for the church to live up to the idea of God's household. Given our fallible human nature, it is nothing short of a miracle, if even a few people can live and worship together in peace and harmony as one body, to use the metaphor of the Apostle Paul.

And yet, for the writer of Ephesians the Church as God's household is not the final word on the matter. He does not see the church as a static picture, something to achieve and then sit back and enjoy. The Church has to grow - he says - and here he is not thinking primarily of numerical growth. Rather he is concerned with

spiritual development. As he puts it "...the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built with all the others into a spiritual dwelling for God." Now, there's a picture! *A holy Temple; a spiritual dwelling for God.*

So, how does this compare with the first picture? Whereas a household is for the benefit of all its members, a temple is made for God. It is designed to be a place where people acknowledge and worship their God. Of course, they know that God is everywhere, yet they set aside a special place, where they can concentrate on all the things that God means to them. When the writer of the Ephesian letter mentions a holy temple, most of his readers would automatically think of the Temple in Jerusalem, the most hallowed spot in the Jewish world, the Lord's earthly dwelling place, the focal point of the most solemn rites and celebrations since the time of ancient Israel.

The original Temple, as we mentioned before, was built by King Solomon. In our first reading we heard part of Solomon's prayer with which he dedicated the new building to God. The passage describes the magnificent occasion. Priests and Levites carried the Ark of the covenant from Bethlehem, the city of David up to the new Temple in Jerusalem, where the King and thousands of people from all over Israel stood waiting. The king himself knew how daring it was to hope that God would live in a man-made building. In his prayer he asked:

*"But can God indeed dwell on earth?
Heaven itself, the highest heaven, cannot contain you;
how much less this house that I have built?"*

When the priests placed the Ark inside the inner shrine, the Holy of Holies "a cloud filled the house" conveying to the Israelites the presence of the glory of the Lord. To them it meant the divine acceptance of the man-made house, which then became a place of regular worship and pilgrimage for those near and far. When they came to visit it they left their homes and work behind, taking time out to spend it with their God. We can catch a glimpse of how they felt about the place from one of the Psalms:

*"Lord of Hosts, how dearly loved is your dwelling place!
... Better one day in your courts, than a thousand days in my home"*

- says the writer of Psalm 84. And as they came they brought their praises and thanksgiving, they brought the animals for the sacred rituals of sacrifice performed by the priests and through the priests they received God's forgiveness and guidance. In the Temple all the activities were directed towards God.

Is our church anything like this? Are we, as the people of God in this place, a focal point for God? Is our life together in Christ centered around seeking and doing God's will to the best of our ability? Do we provide a spiritual haven, where all who come can meet God, receive forgiveness and can be enfolded in the glory of God? According to the writer of the Ephesian letter it is possible to be that kind of place, that kind of community if it is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets and Jesus Christ himself as the foundation stone.

I've heard a story, an actual real-life story about a desperate mother whose teenage son had recently been diagnosed with schizophrenia. After many years of staying away from the church, she strayed into Coventry Cathedral, where she found a small daily prayer meeting in progress. They happened to be praying for young people in general and they were just coming to the end of their gathering. As they were getting ready to go the woman plucked up courage and spoke to the priest about her son, whereupon he held the group back and they started their praying all over again - this time purely for the unfortunate young boy. For that woman these few people became a spiritual haven. In their love and understanding she felt uplifted, she was no longer alone with her troubles, she regained an inner peace, which she had not known for a long time. God was in that place at that moment, and those praying people managed to communicate the divine presence as a balm to the woman's wounded soul. She left much relieved and more hopeful. What a great calling and privilege for a church to be such a spiritual dwelling for God and a haven for those who seek that God!

But this is still not the end of the road. The Ephesian Letter, which is known for its amazingly high vision of the Church is going further into its aspiration for the people of God. "So may you attain the fullness of being, *the fullness of God himself*" we read in Chapter 3 of the New English Bible translation. So what is the meaning of this exalted concept of being filled with the very fullness of God? I rather liked the view of one of the commentators, who used the analogy of a car that runs at its best when it is filled with the right kind of fuel. It

expresses the belief that we are designed to run at our optimal level when we are filled with the fullness of the love, generosity, peace and forgiveness we call God. Most of the time we are filled with all sorts of other things, good things, needful things, but unless all those things are being attended to with the right backing, in the power of the 'right fuel', we may miss out on the fullness of life we so much desire.

Are we there yet? - Our children ask on long car journeys. Well, I won't ask if our church is anything like this last vision? For I acknowledge with the writer of the Ephesian letter that even the comprehension of this high vision is mostly beyond us. Yet, his prayer, and mine, is that we might come to know the unknowable. Two different Greek words are used here, one to express a kind of academic, cerebral kind of knowledge, the other is a lived, experiential knowledge. It is in this lived experience, in the following of Christ day by day that, - not individually, - but together as a community we may become the holders of the fullness of God. May the Spirit of Christ strengthen us as we take our part in this glorious process.

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