

## CHURCH – Community and People

(no set readings) [MW19-16]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 22 September 2019

There's a story about a Vicar taking an evening service in a rural village in the north of England. Only one person, a farmer, shows up. The Vicar thinks to himself, well let's have a great service anyway. They sing all the hymns and all the verses. He reads all the Bible readings, preaches a complete sermon, prays all the prayers. At the end he speaks to the farmer at the church door. "I hope you enjoyed the service!" "Aye, well, about that," says the farmer, "I have just one thing to say. In winter when I'm feeding out, if I go into a paddock with my trailer load of hay and only one sheep comes over, I don't give them the whole bleeding trailer full!"

I tell that to remind myself not to overwhelm with a whole heap of stuff

- there is so much that happened, so much that I did so many people that I met ...
- so this is a couple of 'snapshots', some 'glimpses' from my time away which may become more fully developed as the Spirit leads over the coming weeks

Perhaps my main wisdom/learning

- is to pay more attention to what is happening in the church community in the community which surrounds the church community
- in the nation and in the world and how the Holy Spirit is leading me and us to respond

Someone asked me on Friday what wisdom have I come back with?

- the wisdom to know that I am still learning to work on being humble, aware that I have been blessed by the experiences I have shared in and the people I have spent time with
- to take time to reflect on all that and how it works out because some is just for me and some is to be shared
- however I am aware that my time away has made me look at my life and my calling in a fresh way
- what I aim to encourage in us all is to share the passion and joy of living as people who have been impacted by Jesus Christ

My main aim, what I thought I would be doing

- and it kind of worked out and at the same time turned out different to that which is just how it is with God
- my main aim was to see how churches connected with the community that surrounds the place where people gather as "church"

In some ways this not exactly hampered me, but made things a bit ... unusual

- as I was trying to be an active participant but at the same time observe what was going on
- one thing I learnt is that there is so much more to learn! and there are other ways of doing things that are okay too
- I guess it encouraged me to be way less judgemental and look for what God is doing in this, how the Spirit is moving

We spent the most time in a little town called Cedarville, in Ohio, in the United States

- through our host family we were part of a house church network  
the Xenia house church network, which is made up of 12 house churches
- each separate group is a complete church  
it meets in a home – usually the House Shepherd's (the church leader)  
usually on a week night  
made up of 12 to 30 people of all ages, very inclusive and very welcoming
- church consists of a shared meal and fellowship  
worship/singing, teaching, sharing and praying  
and once a month or so, communion
- that is church: it is very easy to be part of  
something you would have no problem inviting your neighbour  
or your cousin or your best friend to share in

On Sunday mornings the members of these churches come together

- for what they call “The Gathering”  
where there is some singing and praying, great teaching and notices and planning
- anyone is able to come along to this gathering  
and those who do just turn up are encouraged to join a house church
- the Welcome Desk on Sunday mornings has a sign which says:  
“The church is not a building. The church is people.”  
which is a good place to start and keep grounded in
- there is no special building  
people connect through their relationships in the places where they live and work
- I tell you, it was inspiring and also challenging to live in the midst of this  
the people did all this as part of their ordinary daily lives

The family who hosted us put this into practice 24/7

- yes, yes, I know – it is what we are all called to do  
but I have never before been with people who so naturally embodied this  
they were so generous, so open, so caring
- they were absolutely amazing neighbours  
share anything, help with anything
- and equally generous to complete strangers ...  
Nathan took me out for drive through Mexican takeout one day  
when he got to the window to pay, he said he would also pay for the guy behind
- he didn't want to know how much or get a receipt  
I wonder what that guy thought when he got to the window  
and was told it's been paid for ...

Their house church, during the summer, once a month did a “cook out”

- they distributed fliers around the whole neighbourhood  
inviting people to come for a meal
- the church cooked hamburgers and hot dogs, provided salads and buns  
cold drinks and dessert
- we were there for one – over sixty people turned up, and were fed  
members of the church made sure everyone was okay, mixed and talked  
there were members of the local police along with neighbourhood bad boys
- it was, in short, amazing  
and it was “church”

But also, when there is a building which is a home to people who gather as “church”

- how might that work???
- a couple of brief examples

Last Sunday I worshipped at St John's Cathedral in Hong Kong

- it is a traditional “English Gothic” building  
in some ways a little out of place in an oriental setting  
with traditional services, robes, choir, organ, incense, candles, processions
- and it works!  
all with sincerity and joy, celebrating being the people of God  
having new life in Jesus Christ and doing their best to live it out

They make the most of their position in a busy thoroughfare

- what really struck me was that the building was in constant use  
there were services and events the whole day  
with people able to enter and leave as they chose
- it was just so busy – with people coming and going the whole time  
the porch is open and people walk through  
the doors are open
- there is a huge noticeboard in the porch, very prominent  
and on it is clearly outlined who they are and what they believe  
along with prayers for the city and the world  
and invitations to join in various activities and events

The grounds around the Cathedral include a small garden, paved areas, seats and a labyrinth

- this allows people to walk and talk and sit and reflect  
people were even picnicking
- this church community knows its surrounding community  
and their place in it  
and there are all kinds of links and opportunities to connect with people

Then there is Southwell, a small town near Nottingham in England

- in the 11<sup>th</sup> century a beautiful and large Norman-style church  
a minster, began to be built
- it was completed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and every single day since then  
there have been sung services, with a choir
- it is a wonderful building, but it is not a museum  
it is home to an active and outreaching community
- the building attracts tourists and they use that  
they seek to point people to the spirituality behind the stone and stained glass  
to enable them to see the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ

There is a school and a choir

- people are very keen to be part of these  
and they use this to pass on what it is to be the sons and daughters of God
- the building is a great facility for concerts and performances  
and they use that to communicate that this is more than a building
- they have a very clear sense of being a place where the people of God  
have gathered over the centuries, and gather now  
and this makes a difference

On the Sunday we were there they were doing something a bit different

- it was a "Brick Communion Service"  
the culmination of a two week children's holiday programme which had been based around Lego Bricks – building blocks
- at the beginning of the service Lego models depicting Bible scenes were processed in and placed in front of the altar
- and it was all linked together and connected to us who were there Sunday morning  
yes, the church building was made out of stone blocks/bricks  
and we are the building blocks of the church
- people are the living stones, going out to build the church  
in the places where we live

In Cedarville, Hong Kong and Southwell people gather as church

- conscious of their place in their communities  
in order to share the love of God in Jesus Christ

What might this mean for us?

- let me suggest this for a starting place:

We are blessed with facilities and resources

- people and relationships  
opportunities and experiences

We are called to connect what we do when we gather here

- with everything else we do  
where we live, our families, our neighbours, our workmates, our interactions
- because it is true that the church is not a building  
the church is us  
the church is you and me and all of us here
- the church is our relationship with Jesus and with each other  
and with those we live and work amongst

Just how that all comes together ...

- I am still working on  
and I'd like to invite you to join me, to work with me in this:  
church, community, people

Amen.