

Occupying a Holy Space

7th March 2010

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Readings:

Exodus 3:1-6

Psalm 1

Colossians 3:1-17

What we've been trying to do in our preaching over these last few weeks is to think about the benefits of being disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We thought a lot, last summer, about the responsibilities of discipleship ... beginning with Jesus' Great Commission by which we are sent out in active service to make new disciples ... but since January we have considered what it means to be part of God's family.

It is a wonderful thing to recognise and meditate on just how much we are loved by God ... how he has set us on the firm foundation of faith in Jesus Christ and is building us up to be 'a spiritual house' ... how he has given us freedom to change from our old, destructive ways, to be re-made in the image of Jesus, restoring us to the masterpieces of creation which we were always intended to be.

It is amazing to consider that the almighty God who created everything and holds all things together, chooses to have a relationship with us which is 'close up and personal' ... that he has given us both his word and his Spirit so that we can be tuned in to the heart of God, and know his will for our lives ...

... that he counts us more precious than all of creation ... and that we are free to accept his invitation without delay, committing ourselves to him, and knowing the freedom of a new life as a child of God.

What an amazing God we serve!

What incredible love he has for us!

How gracious and forgiving he is!

How privileged we are to be his!

Becoming a Christian is much more than just coming to Church, or taking on a new set of beliefs. It is more than trying to live a good life ... though many people think that this is what it means, and that if they avoid becoming an armed robber or an axe murderer God will surely be more or less pleased with them.

Becoming a Christian is more, even, than beginning to follow Jesus as our example ... because it must involve a change of heart and mind ... a recognition of our need for forgiveness and our dependence on God's mercy, and a genuine decision not only to accept Jesus as our Saviour, but also to worship him and obediently follow him as Lord.

The Bible teaches that when we come to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ a new life begins. The old has gone, and the new has come ... we have a share in his death and resurrection. In 2 Corinthians 5 (v17) Paul writes:

"... if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

By virtue of God's work in us by his Holy Spirit, it is as though we died with him on Good Friday's cross and rose again with him from the Tomb to share in his resurrection life. It is as we were thinking about last Sunday ... we have died to the old life of selfishness and sin, and been re-born as children of God.

Remember how John begins his gospel, writing about the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World, who gives light to every person? Jesus was in the world, which he had created, but the world did not recognise him. He was ignored by some and rejected by others:

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12f)

So that is what we are, if we are true believers ... children of God, re-born into a new life with Jesus ... an everlasting life in his presence which begins here and now, the moment we make our decision to commit our lives to him. That's why I was saying last Sunday:

"The moment is now."

Paul writes here, in Colossians 3 (v1f), about our response to this new life which we have been given by God:

"Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

Along with this description of what we are now, comes the promise of what we shall be:

*"When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also appear with him in glory."
(v4)*

That's quite a statement, isn't it ... *"Christ ... who is your life."*

There's no room there for a half-hearted faith ... Paul is describing a believer who has fully committed his or her life to Jesus, who has become for them the very centre of their life ... a true disciple.

Paul sets out a challenge for Holy Living, not in terms of obedience to a set of negative rules ... 'don't do this and you mustn't do that' ... but as the positive response of a holy people who are privileged to live in the presence of their holy God.

I suspect we take too little note of being in the presence of God. As those who have become used to knowing Jesus not only as Saviour and Lord, but also as friend and brother, we can become almost too comfortable with the idea of God's presence, and lose the right sense of awe which we should feel when we draw near.

Exodus 3 gives us an account of Moses meeting with God on Mount Horeb.

Moses had left Egypt under a cloud, to say the least ... because, despite being raised as an Egyptian Prince, he knew himself to be a Hebrew ... and having seen one of the Egyptian slave drivers cruelly beating a Hebrew slave, Moses had killed him, and hidden his body in the sand.

When what Moses had done became known, Pharaoh was intent on killing him ... and Moses fled from Egypt, settling in the land of Midian. There, in time, he married and settled down to raise a family, and worked as a shepherd for his father-in-law for forty years, until the time had come for God to reveal his plan.

God broke in on Moses' pastoral life in a dramatic way, which Moses did not expect, but could not have missed. There he was, tending the family flock, when he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. Moses caught sight of what is commonly called 'the burning bush'.

What the Scripture *actually* says is:

"... the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within an bush."

and then a little later it says:

"God called to him from the bush."

So was it an angel that Moses encountered ... or God himself?

The Old Testament often uses terms like 'the angel of the Lord' and 'the Lord' interchangeably ... and it doesn't much matter. What matters here is that God got Moses' attention, through a bush which was on fire but not burning. God called to Moses, and Moses responded:

"Here I am."

Notice how Moses then responded to the presence of God:

1. He took off his sandals ... because God told him to. Moses didn't know at first who was speaking to him, but God told him: *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."* Moses was discovering that in the presence of our holy God, some mark of reverence and respect is appropriate.
2. Moses hid his face ... once God had revealed to him who he was ... *"the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."* Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look on God.

Holy reverence and holy fear. Right at the end of Moses' life, we read in Deuteronomy 34 (vv10ff):

"... no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt – to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no-one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel."

The Lord knew Moses 'face to face' ... he met with him on Mount Sinai and gave him the Commandments ... he revealed his glory to him, and knew him as his friend ... and yet Moses never ceased to come before God with reverence and holy fear.

Remember, it all began there on Mount Horeb (Exodus 3:5):

"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

So what is Holy Ground?

Many of us can relate to the idea of Holy Places ... places where you are somehow more than usually aware of the presence of God. It may be because of particular associations that place has for you, perhaps because of a spiritual experience which occurred there.

Some may experience this when they go into a splendid cathedral ... others may have the same experience in a quiet chapel or a lonely seashore. Somewhere which seems especially holy to one person may not have the same associations for another ... it all depends on where you find you most naturally meet with God.

Interestingly, many people say of the chapel here, especially when it is closed off during the week and the building is quiet. Perhaps because the chapel is only for worship and prayer, there is a sense that here is a place where God is especially close, in this place where prayer is offered up.

It was very much like that for me going to the Holy Land.

Some of the places I have visited made little impression as far as being holy is concerned, but there are places which seem to be what some people have described as 'thin places' ... where the connection between heaven and earth seems especially strong, and taking off your shoes seems the most appropriate thing to do. I have felt that very much in the Garden of Gethsemane ... on the shore of the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum, where Jesus walked among the fishermen ... and in the shepherd's fields in Bethlehem, where the angels announced the birth of the Saviour.

'Taking off your shoes' may be a literal or figurative thing, though there have been times here at St Philip's when I have felt I needed to do just that. There may be times when you feel the only appropriate thing to do is to kneel ... or to stand ... or to lift your hands in worship. Whatever it is, it is a symbolic, responsive way of acknowledging that God is present, and our need to respond to him in reverence and awe.

One of the few downsides of having a multi-purpose Church building is that we have to work a little harder to create a sense of specialness for worship on a Sunday. It matters that we make an effort to ensure that the building is properly prepared, and that what happens here is special and honouring to God. But important as the building may be, what is going on in our hearts is much more important. I hope that when you come into the Church building to worship, you come with an expectation of entering the presence of God.

St Philip's is a Holy Place for me because some of the most moving times of worship I have experienced have taken place in this building, and I believe that God keeps his promise, and is present with us when we come together to worship him.

Of course we don't need to be in a special place to meet with God. When I came up with the title for today, I was thinking less of the physical space which we occupy, and more of the space we occupy in the heart of God. If we have invited Christ into our lives and the Holy Spirit is dwelling within us, then we are 'in Christ', and as such we are always occupying a Holy Space.

If to be Holy is to be set aside for God, then that is what we are. We are holy, not because of our inherent goodness, but because of the grace of God at work in us. We cannot achieve holiness by our own effort or merit, but he has made us holy.

But that doesn't let us off the hook.

Paul wrote to the Colossians (3:3):

"For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

"You died." ...That's a pretty powerful image.

Death is the most dramatic change we go through after birth ... and for the Christian, an ending that leads to a new beginning. If as Christians we have died to the old life, and been raised up with Jesus to the new life ... then the life which we now live must surely be very different from the life we had before we came to faith in the Lord Jesus.

So Paul urges us to 'put to death' all that belonged to our former life ... and the list is long and telling:

- Sexual immorality ... impurity ... lust ... evil desires ... greed, which is idolatry, because it means we are making that which we long for more important in our lives than Jesus.
- Anger ... rage ... malice ... slander ... filthy language ... lies.

I guess we all need to examine ourselves.

Some of those things which Paul mentions seem pretty extreme ... but some are disarmingly easy to fall into, and all of us are vulnerable. The temptations around us are so strong, that sometimes we find it hard to overcome:

We live in a world where every soap opera plot has it's obligatory affair ... young people in particular are portrayed jumping into bed at the drop of a pair of trousers ... and in which famous sports stars go public on falling prey to sexual temptation. Are we, as Christians, prepared to stand up for what the Bible teaches about sexual morality ... that sex is a beautiful gift from God, but intended by God only for those who are married to each other?

Or what about impurity? I'm not advocating that we go back to the days when many Churches condemned dancing or going to the pictures ... but what about the sort of things we choose to watch, whether at the cinema, or on the TV, or on our Computer Screens? Surveys have found that a large percentage of *women, let alone men*, will admit to being hooked on pornography ... and that this is a very common problem even within the Church.

Then there's the matter of greed, in a world in which the rich, including all of us here, have more access than ever before in history to a wider range of goods and services than we can possibly ever need ... and yet we so easily think we need everything under the sun.

We are better fed, better clothed, and better entertained than ever before, and yet still we are not satisfied. Meanwhile the recession has led to lower levels of giving in Churches, and less support for charities working with the world's poor. Do we believe in God's wrath?

I won't go through the whole list, but I will say something about malice, slander, and filthy language. I'm not, myself, a great Facebook user, though it is brilliant for getting up-to-the-minute photographs of the grandchildren, and reconnecting with long-lost friends. But if you are a user, have you noticed how free people are with what they say on Facebook?

On Facebook and other social networking sites, people will insult others in the most

horrible terms which are probably legally slanderous, and write things which are astonishingly crude. I've seen Christians using language which would give a film an 18 certificate, as though because it is happening on a computer it is not dishonouring to God.

How can this be, when as Christians we are called to holiness ... not just in Church, but at home, at work, amongst our friends ... and even on cyberspace.

Paul says:

"Put to death ... whatever belongs to your earthly nature."

If we have died to the old life, and been born again to a new life with God, then we must surely change ... and though these changes won't happen overnight, they must come.

Why is all this so very important? ... because God wants us to become what we were made to be, and what we now are through Jesus. We are, as we read in verse 12:

"God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved"

... and to be holy is to be set aside for God's purpose ... and through that to become more like him. We are, if we are true believers and open to the Spirit of God, being transformed into his likeness and remade in his image ...

... but if we go on living as we did before, and according to our old nature, we are effectively denying the God's work in us, and discrediting him by our words and actions.

We are chosen. We are dearly loved. Therefore, we must be, as God is:

compassionate ... kind ... humble ... gentle ... and patient

We must also, as Paul says, 'bear with each other'. In other words, we have to give each other room to change and be changed, recognising that we too are a work in progress. Perfection will only come when we go to be with the Lord forever.

For now, we need to forgive the faults we find in one-another, and help one-another on the way to Christlikeness. This is why Paul emphasises love above all ... the virtue which binds all the others together ... which forgives failings and seeks to build one-another up as disciples of the Lord Jesus.

The last paragraph of this passage is really important (v15):

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."

The peace to which Paul refers is much more than feeling at peace with yourself, and much more than doing our best to get along with one-another with gritted teeth. We are called to peace 'as one body' ... a loving Christian community, united in heart and purpose.

This peace grows as we are honest and loving with one-another ... teaching ... guiding ... advising ... correcting ... and as we cultivate an attitude of love which is concerned to build one-another up. There is no place within the Church of God for holding resentments ... having favourites ... or treating any member of our community with anything less than love. It means we have to work at relationships, overcome petty

differences ... and honour one-another in the way that we would honour Jesus.

"Whatever you do", says Paul (v17), "do it all in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

In this way we will enable one-another to set our minds on things above ... to live out our calling as children of God who have died to the old life and been raised with Christ ... and so to joyfully occupy that Holy Space to which God calls us, as his chosen people, who are indeed holy and dearly loved.