

Service Transcript

21st February 2021

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Speaker: Mark Reid

Welcome to Maidstone Road Baptist church online.

Opening words using Psalm 95:1-7

Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

I am reminded of this quote by Desmond Tutu who led the reconciliation in South Africa: My humanity is bound up in yours, because we can only be human together. As church we are called to be human within a fellowship. To have a commitment to belonging and that is our theme today. But we are not always successful and the experience is not always good. Today as we think about belonging. I found this clip and in light of today's subject found it really engaging. See what you think.

Most people don't go to church because they went once video.

There are 2 reasons I liked this. Firstly because the scripture quoted is the one which was my personal invitation when I came to know Jesus for myself. And secondly because for a lot of people church does not "fit".. But the focus should not be on that. It should be on Jesus. We will be singing about that in a moment, but we need to remember that first we are told to Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind..... and then to love others as ourselves. The second flows out of the first.

Prayers

I am reminded of the story of Mary in John 12:1-8 when I think about church. She poured out expensive perfume and wiped Jesus feet with her hair. This was very daring. She had use what was probably her lifes savings to by the perfume and in a culture where women covered their hair in public, she sacrificed her reputation. To worship Jesus Mary was willing to give what she had including her reputation. Sometimes we feel pressured to be perfect in church. But in a healthy church we can, as Mary did, let our hair down and reveal our weaknesses in order that through fellowship we find strength. It is the difference between concealing faults, fears and weaknesses to

appear strong, and revealing them to find strength. Lets pray together.... Say this as a personal prayer.

Spoken prayer: A personal prayer.

Lord I desire to learn how to worship You as You deserve. Help me Lord, to grow into the sort of worshipper that You are seeking, one who worships You in spirit and truth without fear of showing my weaknesses.

I pray that my life may be one that honours You in all I say and all I do, in all the circumstances of life, throughout the day and as I drift into sleep at night.

Lord, I pray that I may learn to walk in all of Your ways, to serve with all of my being and to learn to love You as You have loved me. Teach me Lord, how to worship You in the beauty of holiness so that I may be one that bows my heart before You in spirit and truth, to Your honour and glory. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen

Whatever we face God is with us. We are going to reflect on that as we sing our next song: Faithful one

Father thank you that you are a faithful God. You are our rock in times of trouble and we can call out to you. Thank you that we have all experienced your comfort and love in past difficulties and when we look back we can see your hand working through situations, where at the time we may not have seen what you were doing. We pray for those we know who are struggling at the moment because of illness, loneliness, fear for the future, bereavement and depression. Life has become much more complex and insecure. Things we have taken for granted are gone, perhaps forever. Please help us to support each other in prayer, with phone calls, to be your hands and feet and voice in these times to those around us. Prompt us not to just dig in with an "I'm ok" mentality, but prompt us to reach out to those who need help, support or even just a kind word.

We pray for our fellowship at Maidstone Road. As we think about what we should be in our community and for our members, help us to understand others who think in different ways than we do. Help us to be open to your voice from unexpected places and people. Grant that this time will be a time of renewal and revival for our church.

As we come to hear your word this morning please challenge us out of our comfort zones into the light of your will for us as individuals, and as a church. Use what Mark has prayed through and prepared to transform our perspective and our lives. Amen

Reading: Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Committed to Belonging: Where do we belong?

Where do *you* belong? Who or what do you belong to? What or who belongs to you? I was going to originally just do a single sermon on Committed to Belonging, to talk what it means to belong in the context of a church as an end to my series on Acts 2, but found as I read up about it that I was tapping into a much richer vein than I had imagined.

Belong is a word of relation in a variety of contexts; being an adherent to a set of beliefs, to be a member of something, to be the inhabitant of somewhere. It can also mean being part of something we are qualified for e.g. a professional society, or a church. Belonging is also used to describe things in their proper place e.g. this rubbish belongs in the bin not on the floor. It's also used when we talk about property associated with someone or an item associated with something else like this cap belongs on this bottle.

A sense of belonging is part of the human nature we have been created with. We are social animals and thrive best when we have a sense of belonging – being part of a group: a family, amongst friends, part of a club, working for a company, being part of a nation and of course being part of church.

Belonging may also involve a sense of commitment, of loyalty, of allegiance: the people group or party are those we support through thick and thin, spend our time on it, commit money to it and forsake other things for it. At the deepest levels of belonging there are those who are prepared to die for a cause they feel a sense of belonging to.

As far as our Christian faith is concerned; at it's heart is belonging. When we accepted Christ, we entered into a familial situation where God is our Father, and Jesus our Brother. We came to belong to a new family. In another picture, we became citizens of heaven. We became citizens of a new land. We belong there. I remember that when I was younger there was a Christian song that had this refrain.

*Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me;
Not for the years of time alone, but for eternity!*

Paul talks about belonging in 1 Corinthians 3: 21-23. The Christians at Corinth were identifying themselves themselves as being of Paul, Apollos or Peter. They saw themselves as belonging to the cause of a particular Christian leader. Sounds familiar doesn't it? How many people have attached themselves to a Christian leader and the theological position they espouse such as Calvinism or Arminianism, or attach themselves to a particular line or denomination; evangelical, Baptist, Anglican, charismatic even ecumenical and so on – and often we wear our badge with pride because we have a sense of belonging.

Paul corrects this with these words

*21 So don't boast about following a particular human leader. For everything belongs to you — 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Peter, or the world, or life and death, or the present and the future. Everything belongs to you, 23 and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.
(NLT)*

Paul's response is "take care!" because you can end up attaching yourself to humans and worldly wisdom, rather than seeing the full panoply of what God offers you. "For everything belongs to you" – including Paul, Apollos, Peter and just about everything else. How does it belong to us? We need to go to Romans 8:16-17

16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (NIV)

We now belong to a family in Christ and what belongs to our Father is our inheritance too (and that's all things!) So to attach ourselves to a particular teacher or philosophy limits us from all the other ways out there that we can learn of God and deepen our relationship with Him.

One of the biggest mistakes of attaching ourself to human beings is that they get things wrong and sometimes catastrophically fail. We had an example of catastrophic failure this past few weeks with the revelation that the well-known preacher the late Ravi Zacharias had been living a double life. Apart from the lives he ruined through sexual abuse, his behaviour has trashed his whole ministry, and has deflated a worldwide following. How many people have been put off church by the behaviour of those in it? We have already considered that earlier in the service. Look to the one we truly belong to – Jesus.

Paul's message is - take care who or where you choose to belong because you belong to Christ first and foremost. So, where should we belong as God's people? We are joint-heirs with Christ, we have been made part of a family of God the Father – we belong with them, as God has made us part of His people – the church.

What we found right from the start in the book of Acts is that the Church realised that they belonged with one another in Christ – they did everything together and had everything in common. They came to faith with the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus fresh in their shared experience. Archbishop Michael Ramsey commenting on this passage made the point that *"They did not think of the church as a kind of a thing in itself. They were concerned only with the dying and rising of Jesus and the power of his resurrection at work in their lives."*

If you are looking for a picture of belonging, then we see it in these heady days as the church expanded rapidly. It was this focus that they belonged together and they belonged to Christ, that lay at the heart of the church, and when they departed from that and started to think of themselves rather than their fellow brothers and sisters, and when they started to attach to others rather than Christ alone, that things started to break down.

Wind on about 20 year to the church at Corinth, I'd say that the church was not just a breakdown; more of a car crash and Paul had to remind them of who they were in Christ. One of the most potent pictures of how we belong together in Christ is found in chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians. Let's take a look at these verses:

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 NRSV

The experience that the Corinthians had, and what we had is the what happened on the Day of Pentecost. In Christ, God the Spirit has come into our lives and in doing so we have been immersed in the body of Christ. Likewise, we have received the Spirit into our lives and we are all spiritually nourished by Him. Church is not a human institution. The body of Christ is God given, God empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is Christ's body and He is it's head.

Church is a privilege that we have all equally been completely immersed into by the Spirit when we trusted and followed Jesus. God has privileged us to be part of Christ and by the same logic, we are privileged to be part of it together with one another. And as the marriage service says of husband and wife, church is a mystical union between Christ and His people.

I say this because in recent years, there have been those who have asked the question:

Can we believe without belonging to the church? We all know people who say they they believe in following Christ, but don't have time for the church. As we heard earlier, they are often those who have been hurt by the church, or just found it irrelevant. If anyone has found that to be true of MRBC, then we have to reflect on that and answer the question, why?

I'm sure the absence of church for large chunks of the past year have led some Christians who have been watching online services, or doing something else on a Sunday or whatever are asking the question "do I need to bother returning?"

It is possible to exist as a Christian and not come to church, but if I understand Acts 2:42-47, such folk will never grow and thrive in the faith and reach their full potential in Christ because we all need other Christians to be able to do that. My experience of those Christians who don't see the need to be part of a church struggle with faith and struggle without the support of a praying fellowship.

For the majority of us, our enforced exile has shown to us how important fellowship is for our spiritual health. If we were to continue down 1 Corinthians 12, we would see how Paul uses the picture of parts of the body to illustrate how the individual parts of the body just can function without the rest.

If we know Christ, we need to be part of a local church. So if you are listening to this today and don't go to church because you think you don't need it; please reconsider. If the church fellowship you were in wasn't the right one for you, then ask the Lord to show you the one that is. It's His will that you be part of a local fellowship. If you have been hurt by Church, then please understand that not all churches are the same and God has already just the right fellowship for you where you can find healing and hope and be drawn closer to Him through it. Allow Him to lead you there.

We finish this morning by affirming the church
Father, thank You for the privilege of making us part of Your family in Christ.
Thank You that we belong to Christ and with one another.
Jesus, thank You that all things belong to us because we belong to You.
As Your Body, bind us together more closely with ties of love and fellowship.
Holy Spirit, thank you that You are amongst us and part of us.
Empower us to be the people that we should be in Christ.

Lord Jesus, we are only too aware of our failings as Your church, past and present; for those who have been hurt rather than strengthened, for those who felt unwelcome, for those times when we have trusted human wisdom and arguments rather than seeking Your face, that we have tolerated argument and un-forgiveness in the fellowship, that we've looked inward rather than outward, that we didn't feel being church was important.

We turn away from all those things and we desire to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Father, please give us a renewed enthusiasm to build up the fellowship at Maidstone Road as we leave lockdown and return to worship and serve together face to face again.

Show us by you Spirit how we may build up the fellowship afresh, and ask that You will generously provide all that is needed with plenty left over to share with others.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

The grace: If you belong to Christ, you belong to the church, wherever you are.

Let us say the grace together and celebrate what joins us.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen

For Reflection and Discussion

1. What things or people do you most identify as belonging to? Why is it important to you that you belong to them? As a Christian, what labels of belonging may be attached to you?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 3:21-23. Paul, Apollos and Peter were all exceptional Christian leaders, so what was so wrong in people identifying strongly with them? What does "everything belongs to us" suggest to us about how we should deal with Christian groups and personalities we come across?
3. Read through 1 Corinthians 12:12-26. Why is it so important to be part of a local church? How should we respond to people who have different skills and ideas to ourselves? How did the early Christians deal with it in Acts 2:42-47?
4. Can you really believe and not belong to a local church?