

Sermon Transcript 10th July 2022

“All the difference in the world”

VIDEO

This sermon draws heavily on the LICC Frontline Sundays series.

FRONTLINE SUNDAYS

Frontline Sundays what are they?

THE FRONTLINE?

When we think of the frontline, we invariably think of a military one, like this picture from Ukraine. The military frontline is a well-known picture of the church from the New Testament, particularly from Ephesians 6 about the whole armour of God. Our role is to rescue others from the power of sin and Satan, with whom we are at war.

Of course we are also familiar with the term frontline services; people that are sent out to help others in distress or requiring assistance. It isn't just these well-known emergency services, but a plethora of services designed to help people in need - coastguard, mountain rescue, emergency repairers, car breakdown agents, food banks and the like.

Is the church a frontline service? Actually I know many people who aren't Christians who look at the many good things Christians do and do see us as making a practical difference in the community. We have seen some great ministries in this town arising from and between local churches who help people in need. They may not be emergency services, but their frontline is to bring help to those in need, often quickly.

GATHERED AND SCATTERED

But there is one emergency each man and woman suffers. All have sinned and come short of God's glory. All are lost, all are dying. And we have the means of rescue, the words that bring life and hope. That makes us frontline people; not merely through the work of the church, but in the rest of the week as we live our lives and come into contact with others as individual believers. The church isn't this (the building) but it's us the people whether gathered here, or scattered amongst our community as we well know. So a good definition of Frontline for the purpose of Frontline Sundays is this:

Frontlines are the everyday places where we live, work, study, or play and where we're likely to connect with people who aren't Christians.

And we know from our own experience, that knowing Jesus makes all the difference. He really changes lives, because He changed ours? And continues to do so day by day – hopefully!

Active church now makes up just 6% of the population as we saw in the video. How can we be significant when we are so few? Yet we know even here in Felixstowe that in terms of engagement through formal, practical ministries, that Christians hit way above their weight in the number of people that are clients. But clients aren't by any means believers. We have helped many through Walton Parish Nursing over the years to rekindle their faith, but only a handful have come to Christ for the first time.

GATHERED MINISTRY HAS A LIMITED FRONTLINE

It is one of the problems of formal church-based ministry – that our reach is limited to the few people we have formal direct contact with as a church or as one of the local ministries.

The dominant way by which people still come to Christ is through the witness and words of their Christian friends and neighbours, where they are. I came across this hopeful graphic from Hope England this week.

53% GRAPHIC

53% of the population *still* know a practising Christian (one of the 6%). This is the real frontline of the church – not merely through the direct ministries of the church, but through the Monday to Saturday witness of Christians to their families, friends, neighbours and work colleagues.

WHAT IS YOUR FRONTLINE?

The scattered church during the week is the most effective means by which the church of God grows as people come to Christ through the witness of others. Our frontlines are everyday places where we live, work, study, or play and we're likely to connect with people who aren't Christians. The frontline is huge and scattered – unlike a military - frontline but absolutely like the activity of frontline services we talked about. The Spirit of God goes to where He is needed through God's people, wherever they are.

Each of us have a frontline – the people we regularly meet who don't know Jesus (yet).

What is your frontline?

It's what church is all about. Let's read a couple of verses from Peter's first letter.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:

Grace and peace be yours in abundance. (1 Peter 1:1-2 NIV)

MAP – This letter was written to real places and real people> People like us.

When Peter began his letter to small groups of Christians scattered across ancient Turkey, he wanted them to understand what it meant to be the church. He uses two key words and a stunning truth.

They are God's elect

VERSE AGAIN

By calling them God's elect, Peter demonstrated that they are part of a line of continuity that stretched back to Abraham. Abraham was called by God to be the father of a great nation. He believed God, he was made righteous through it and the rest as they say is history. The Christians Peter was writing to had been called into part of God's ongoing plan of salvation for the world. They trusted and followed Christ and come under His lordship. They were the elect of God – a people called for a purpose.

GATHERED AND SCATTERED

And through our faith and trust in Christ, we are part of that same called people: in the graphics we are the red dots, scattered amongst people who don't know Him – but need to. Sometimes we gather to worship and service, but most of the time we are scattered. All the rest of the time we represent the Holy Spirit of God within us in our community.

They are exiles

VERSES AGAIN

The second term that Peter used is one that recalled the greatest disaster of the Old Testament – when the Jews lost their land. At first they hoped for a quick return. But the prophets told them that most of that first generation of exiles would not return, though they could remain distinct and be a blessing where they were – and many did so.

In Christ we are a scattered people. Yes, we gather in groups, particularly on a Sunday but most of the time we are scattered. SCATTERED GRAPHIC We look forward to a time when God will bring us into His heavenly kingdom, but in the meanwhile we only have a limited time gathered in God's presence. We may be the only disciples of Jesus when we are at home, or at work, or in our class, or in our neighbourhood. These are the places where we are called to shine. Some of us will shine brighter than others as the graphic illustrates. Pressures of life and crises of faith can dim off and start to grey us out. It's important that we don't 'grey out', lose our distinctiveness, and become the same as the surrounding culture. God has a plan in placing us in our scattered contexts and we need to understand that we are part of that plan and grow with Him in it to shine brightly like the red dots on the grey background. All of us. Yes. Us. Each of us without exception who are in Christ – we are part of God's plan for the world. That's a blessing, a privilege and our call is to bless others with it. Let's look at the verses again

A stunning truth

VERSES

We ... have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.

This is one of these lovely Trinitarian passages we looked at a few weeks ago:

- Our situations are known by God – his foreknowledge
- We have been set apart by the Spirit – his sanctifying work; we are made fit and right for Him
- We can be confident of our relationship with God – the sprinkling of blood is a sign of being included in his covenant.

And all that is in the context of 'being obedient to Jesus', aligning ourselves with Christ and his purposes in the world. Peter rejoices with his readers in all that God has done for us. And he reminds them, and us, that we live out the implications of the gospel in our scattered places. We are elect and we are exiles.

The series will go on to explore the implications of this for us wherever we are, whatever we do, and whoever we are. It finishes by looking at what it means to be a disciple-making community together – for the sake of the world. We are red dots when we gather to strengthen one another as a distinct people. We are red dots when we scatter – to many different places with many different people. People who can make all the difference in the world.

WHERE IS MY FRONTLINE?

So where are my frontlines? Some of you work. It's your office colleagues, your fellow workers. Maybe you are part of various organisations around time – part of clubs, part of local interest groups. Perhaps you are part of some kind of activity. Maybe you are the only Christians in your family? All of us have frontlines. Let's pray that God will identify our personal frontlines, that we may start to consider how we may effectively be obedient to Christ in every situation.

TITLE

You have already found these "scatter mats". They are here for you to take home as an *aide-memoire* to pray this coming week that God will identify clearly your personal frontline. It will also be a reminder for you to pray for those who don't know Christ who you meet regularly, that you pray for them. If you use it as a mat while you drink your tea or coffee, you can pray there then. Whatever you do - pray.

Let's pray that we may have a fresh vision and desire to want to see others come to Christ and this final song is a prayer that God will give us that heart of compassion for others, that we may bring hope to those on our frontlines. Let's pray it together as we sing.

SONG *Give me a heart of compassion*

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Gathered Dots

How does it feel to be a Christian minority in our nation?

Peter uses the word 'elect' to describe the Christians to whom he wrote, reflecting all that began in Genesis 12:2–3. Take a moment to read Genesis 12:2–3. (Note: the threat of cursing in verse 3 might sound harsh, but it shows God will protect Abraham and his people.) What do you think it meant for Abraham, and by extension Israel, to be a blessing?

How does this help us understand what God would want of us today?

How are you distinct as a gathered people of God? What do you believe that is different from the general population? What do you do that is different? (Note: Think about core beliefs and practices – prayer, giving generously, hospitality to strangers, Bible reading etc.) How do these help you 'stay red' together?

Scattered Dots

What are the specific places you are scattered in during the week? What is your experience of being a Christian there and how distinctively Christian are you there?

Peter describes early Christians as 'exiles', referencing when God allowed Israel's enemies to defeat them, and force them into exile. In exile they had to learn to live as a distinct people. Jeremiah 29 was written to them, including the famous verse: 'I know the plans I have for you...' (29:11). But that verse follows God's command to 'Build houses and settle down, plant gardens... marry... seek the peace of the city... pray for it.' (29:5–7). How would that command have felt for devout Jews in exile? How are Jeremiah's words relevant for us today?

Exploring Frontlines

Frontlines are the everyday places where we live, work, study, or play and where we're likely to connect with people who aren't Christians.

How helpful do you find it as a term? Why? Why not?

Read Ephesians 6:10–18. If 'frontlines' suggests battles to you, is it helpful to think of ourselves in a confrontation? If so, who is the enemy?

Read Philippians 2:14–16. If 'frontlines' refers to the everyday places where we do life and interact with non-Christians, what do the verses say about it? Where do you think your frontlines are? What might God's purpose be for you in each of these places?