

Three Marks of God's Church

Ephesians 1:1-2

Have you had car trouble recently?

Our most recent car issue has been with the battery.

My own fault of course, I left the headlights on and the battery started to go. I got back to the car just in time, it slow-slow-slowly turned over and started. And so for the next hour or so I drove it around waiting for that warning light to go off, the warning light which comes on when the battery isn't charged enough.

We've had lots of battery issues over the years, mainly because we've never parked our car in a garage and so the elements have their way with it, although when something goes wrong you don't always know it's the battery, when the mechanic comes they pull out a little gauge, don't they, to check the battery's vital signs: *Is it charged, can it **be** charged?* Because for the car to do its job then these vital signs need to be in place.

Today we begin a new sermon series looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Our plan is to look at the first three chapters of this letter now and then look at chs 4-6 later in the year.

And to begin with we are taking a look at the first two verses of the letter, where Paul extends his greeting to the church that he is writing to. Paul's greeting contains some description of the group receiving his letter, and also about his own relationship with them.

I would like to suggest that the marks we have here in these first two verses can act as a gauge that can help us read the health of the church. Are our vital signs in order? As a church, are we healthy enough to function in the way that's expected? Would these verses make sense if Paul was writing to our church in Waitara?

Let's hear Paul's greeting and think about whether we could be included.

He begins by giving himself a label, Ch 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

What does it mean for Paul to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God?

We first hear about Apostles in the NT Gospels.

Have a listen to the description in Luke ch 6:

When morning came, [Jesus] called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: ¹⁴ Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, ¹⁵ Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, ¹⁶ Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

You've heard of the 12 disciples,
 Well those individuals are more accurately described as Apostles;
 Twelve who were selected by Jesus from the wider pool of disciples
 and appointed by Jesus to learn from him and to carry out his work.

Luke gives us a snapshot of this work in ch 9:1-2

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, ²and he *sent them out* to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.

This passage really gets at the heart of what it means to be an apostle.

The word Apostle means 'one who is sent'—

which is exactly what Luke records;

Jesus sends the twelve out to proclaim his message.

Paul was added to these twelve Apostles a few years later
 when the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus
 and appointed him as the Apostle to the Gentiles,
 the apostle to those without a Jewish background.

What's important in this description is the link the Apostles have to Jesus Christ

Paul says he is an *Apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God*

These were not self-appointed teachers

who were bent on making a name for themselves,

rather they were appointed by Christ to speak in his name.

I wonder whether you have ever done battle with an institution

when trying to authorize someone else to speak on your behalf.

Maybe you want a spouse or an associate to take care of your accounts,

So you have to hand the phone over to the person you're trying to represent

and they have to verify their own identity by answering certain questions

and then they give permission for you to represent them,

or maybe you have to go in to the bank and go through an official ID process.

It's a pain but its important because you need the right authorization,

people need to be sure that it is actually your will

to have someone represent you.

The Apostles have the right authorization;

Jesus has commissioned them,

and it is God's will that they speak on his behalf.

There are some people who will try and drive a wedge between Jesus and Paul.

They'll love Jesus, but they'll be embarrassed by Paul.

You can't drive a wedge between their teaching,

Paul teaches with Christ's blessing. In fact it's stronger than that,

Paul teaches because Jesus has command him to, he's been sent.

And so what was the result of Paul being sent on this mission?

The result was that churches were established all over the Mediterranean, including the church in Ephesus.

We read in the book of Acts that Paul made a number of visits to Ephesus, including one stay of three years.

And during these visits he taught the church by word and example; Not only did he teach the churches but he would encourage them to imitate his example as he imitated Christ.

And so this is why Paul can say in Ephesians 2:20

that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles.

And then in Revelation 21 as John receives his vision of the heavenly city, —the eternal community of God—

he notices that the names of the Apostles are written on the city foundations.

This is the relationship between the Apostles and the church.

The Apostles provide the foundation upon which the church is built.

This is still the case today:

Some of you may remember saying the Nicene Creed from they Prayer Book.

We haven't said it here at this service for a long time.

It's traditionally been said when sharing in Holy Communion, perhaps we'll say it next time we share in that symbolic meal together.

But in the Nicene Creed we say

*we believe in one holy catholic and **apostolic** church.*

Our church is a community based on the Apostles.

In practice this means we'll be a church that takes the NT seriously.

The NT is what the Apostles have left us,

it's both an account of their teaching and also a record of their example.

We will read it, seek to understand it and seek to implement it.

Does any one here remember the TV show *The West Wing*?

It was a drama on TV about 15 years ago,

set in the West Wing of the White House;

a drama about the US President and his staff.

There was one episode where the President is meeting with a Christian leader who is seek asylum for himself and a group of refugees.

The President is concerned that this might be a false claim and so he sets about testing the man.

He asks "Can you name me the 12 Apostles?" How would you go in that test?

The asylum seeker does really well, names them all. And then he adds this:

Mr President, Christianity is not demonstrated through the reciting of facts.

You are seeking evidence of faith. "For we hold that man is justified by faith alone" that is what St Paul said. Faith is the marker.

He demonstrates that the message of the Apostles has found a place deep within him,
and so he's granted asylum.

May it also be the case with us,
that the teaching of the Apostles finds its way deep into our own hearts
and also into the culture of our own church.

And as we build our lives and our church on the Apostles,
we'll find that the same apostles call us to be holy and faithful in Christ Jesus
That's how the church is described in the second half of verse 1,
The letter is addressed to God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Whenever God has established a community that's connected to him,
part of the deal has always been that the community is to be *holy*.
To be holy means to be set apart, to be noticeably different.

It was this way in the OT.

Our first Bible reading was taken from the book of Exodus
and it described the first ever gathering of God's OT people, the Israelites.
And God saw them as a special group, set apart from all the other nations,
Although the whole earth is mine God says you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a
holy nation.

In what way were the Israelites to be different?

Well, God goes on to give them a whole series of laws that they were to follow
which would distinguish them from the other nations around them.

And in our own way, God's modern day community, the local church,
we are to be distinguishable from the people around us as well.
In what way are we to be different?

Well, you get a sense of how the Ephesian church was different
when you read the description of their city in Acts ch 19.
Ephesus was a town that was into the religion and spirituality business.
And into this business in a big way.

We are told that as people in the town came to believe the preaching about Jesus
A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them
publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand
drachmas. Which in today's terms amounts to millions of dollars.
Sorcery was a big money spinner and yet, as people joined their church,
they turned their backs on it.

And then we read the famous account of the riot in Ephesus.

Ephesus was the location of the great temple of Artemis,
so grand that it became one of the seven ancient wonders of the world.
In Acts 19 we read of Demetrius the silversmith
who made his living by making small statues of Artemis,

But when Paul came along preaching about how people should worship Jesus
 And about how idols made by human hands were not gods at all,
 Then Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen lost business,
 and so they started a riot and became quite angry with Paul and his friends.

And so what did it mean for the Christians in Ephesus to be different?
 It meant turning their backs on the local religion,
 even if it meant losing money, even if it meant treading on people's toes.
 The most fundamental way the Ephesian church could be different
 was to place their faith in Christ,
 which is how Paul describes them: holy, and faithful.

What does faith in Jesus look like in Sydney? What does it look like in Hornsby?
 What are the Gods of *this city* that our faith in Jesus will challenge?
 Perhaps they are the Gods of our home culture,
 perhaps it's the God of success,
 perhaps the God of family,
 perhaps the God of comfort.
 What differences will people see as they observe our church life together?

Faithfulness to Christ might mean upsetting a few people,
 because people don't like groups who are different.
 When someone is different they make you feel uncomfortable.

But it's also true that some differences are refreshing:
 People long to hear words of grace,
 people long to experience kindness,
 they long to experience peace rather than anger or aggression.

And so this leads to another marker of the church,
 the third marker which we have in this introduction,
 and that's the *grace and peace* that is bestowed upon the us
 Verse 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In one sense this is perhaps the central marker of all three,
 because the most basic definition of church
 is that it's a community of people who are at peace with God
 because of his grace. The church only exists because of God's grace.

The theme that I've chosen to hold all these sermons together is the theme of grace.
 The theme emerges at a number of points, especially in the opening chapters,
 and when we speak of *grace* we don't mean *elegance* and *beauty*,
 as in "look at that graceful swan on the lake",
 What we mean by grace is mercy and favour—
 mercy and favour that is undeserved.
 So grace as in when the creditors say "We're giving you a grace period"

And so God's community are a people who've received mercy and favour from God,
in particular, the mercy which establishes *peace* between us and God.

In another letter, Paul wrote that once we were alienated from God
and were his enemies because of our evil behavior.
But in that same letter we are told that we are reconciled with God
because he made peace through Christ's blood, shed on the cross.

And given we are a community that has received grace and peace from God,
it follows that we are to practice grace and peace with one another.
This is one area where our holiness, where our distinction from the world,
can make a real and welcome difference.

I'm not sure whether you heard what happened to Liam Neeson during the week.
Liam Neeson is a Northern Irish actor,
he was in *Shindler's List*, if you remember that film,
Taken is another film that's he's well known for. *Love actually* as well.
His latest movie was about to have it's premier in NYC when it was canceled
because people had become upset with things he said in a recent interview.

In the interview he made a confession about a dark period in his life many years ago.
He confessed to some racism deep in his past,
and he confessed to this sin in a way
that made it obvious that he was sorry about it.
He was attempting to draw lessons from his dark past,
and in no way was he glorifying it or promoting it.

But, people are now calling for him to be digitally removed from his old movies.
We're living in a world where you can't even admit to a mistake,
let alone make one.

However, within this same world we have the church,
a group of people who know about grace and peace.
We've experienced these things from God,
and so we practice them with one another.
Don't you think this is what people are thirsting for?
We can provide a taste of this for them
if we are mindful of being the church God wants us to be.

As a church minister I know that there are heaps of things we could tinker with
in order to improve what we do,
just like there are plenty of things you could tinker with on a car.
We could improve our website, we could use our computer software better,

But when it comes to car maintenance
we know that there are some basics that you have to get right.

Air in your tyres, petrol in the tank, oil in the engine, a charge in the battery.

And I think that aside from all the little things,
there are certain big things that we need to get right as a church:
The apostolic foundation,
the commitment to holiness and faith in Christ,
the practice of grace and peace.

And if we each aim to keep these things in place
then together our church will make progress.

Let's pray.