

# What is church?

## Genesis 12:10-20

What is church? What is it like? What are some of the images, memories or associations you make in your mind when you hear the word 'church'? I'd like to ask you to think or talk about that for a minute, then I'll get some of you to shout out some answers. It can be about this church or other churches you've had experience of. It can be positive or negative - just, what is *your* experience?

*Question - What comes to mind for you at the mention of 'church'?*

There's all sorts of idea associated with church - buildings, traditions, doing good, doing bad! Here's what the Bible describes church as being: The community of people, across ages and across nations, who believe and declare that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is Lord and Saviour. The song we sang before our reading sums up what we believe and why it's important:

That there is a God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

That God the Son, Jesus Christ, lived the perfect life that we never could and died on the cross to take the punishment that we deserved from God.

That Jesus Christ did not stay dead, but rose to life, defeating sin and death for all who would put their trust in Him.

That because Jesus is alive and reigns as King, as all the world will one day see, we're invited to genuinely know Him in relationship with Him now.

That relationship with Jesus is to know Him as Lord - which means, He's in charge, and we'll follow just as He directs rather than doing what we want...

And relationship with Jesus is to know Him as Saviour - which means, we need rescued from something - namely, the sin we're guilty of that breaks our relationship with God, and the death that we're headed for because of it - and Jesus is the Rescuer to do it, through His life death and resurrection.

That's the gospel. Gospel just means, 'good news'. And God wants to announce this good news to you today, calling you to join in with that community of people who are getting to know Jesus more and more as Lord and Saviour, King and Rescuer.

There's a part of the Bible, a letter that a man called Paul wrote to a church in Rome, called Romans. In that letter, in Romans 10:8-13, Paul explains very

simply who is part of that community, that church, of people who have been rescued by God for life to the full, now and forever.

*'But what does it say? "The word of faith is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.*

*'As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in Him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile - the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

Church is not a building; it is a community of people. We *gather* in a building, like we're doing today, to worship God together and hear the Word he wants us to trust together. Many of us are people who are committed to depending on Jesus and committed to doing that with this Christian community here in Inverness. Some of us are finding our way, and are here to find out more about Jesus' call and claims and invitation.

Everybody is welcome here to come just as they are. But nobody who comes into the community of Jesus Christ *stays* where they are. Jesus offers each of us rescue just where He finds us today. But in His Lordship over our lives He'll lead each person who accepts His rescue to change - to become new.

Here's the thing - nobody stays about the church who doesn't think they need to change. You might come one day, like today, because your friend asked you to come and you thought it only right to come. But you won't keep coming here unless you know that you need God to change your life.

Every one of us here who has committed our lives to Jesus has done that knowing that we need Him. We are broken people, who have sinned and messed up and known guilt and isolation from God. We have recognised that and asked Jesus Christ to forgive us and take the punishment for us. We have delighted to accept and know the forgiveness and the eternal life that comes with it that Jesus offers. And we continue to recognise our need for God, day in, day out.

I'd venture to say that every one of us who journeys along in this church who might not yet have reached a point of coming to faith in Jesus, is still about us

regularly because they recognise in their lives that not all is well, and they need change and transformation, and they are investigating whether the God of the Bible is speaking the truth about being the solution to the guilt or fear that hangs over them day by day.

But those of you who are here today who hand-on-heart just don't think they *need* anything and that life's just fine; for whom all is well in the suburbs and neither guilt for wrongdoing or death at the end of this life bothers you - I don't expect we'll see you again. Not until something changes in your heart.

I want you to know that you're always welcome here. Everybody is. But the heart of what church is, is the people who know they need change. The change that only Jesus Christ can and does offer them.

The church is the people who listen to Jesus Christ, and take Him at His Word. The gospel is just this: 'I need Jesus. I depend on Jesus.'

This is church. This is who we are. God-listeners. Promise-hearers. Command-followers. Jesus-apprentices. Word-takers. Life-discoverers. Do you want to be a part of it?

*Silent reflection - Is your life 'fine' under your own strength? Do you need Jesus Christ?*

The passage we read this morning from Genesis tells the story of the earliest days of this community of church in the world. Last week, in Genesis 12:1-9, we read about how God began His mission in this world, and His church - His own people in the world - began with an elderly couple wandering the desert.

Abram heard God's call to put his life in God's hands, to take God at His word and see his life transformed forever. God spoke incredible promises to Abram - he would be richly blessed by God, he would become a great nation, all people in the world would be blessed through him and through God's growing community of people in this Earth.

The story of the beginning of the community of God's people began with such promise. God's firm and secure promises - and Abram taking God at His word, though he could not see what the future would look like as he did that. In Genesis 12:1-9, Abram was boldly taking big steps in his new faith in the Lord God. We left him last week heading in to the land God was calling him to, trusting God would provide through it, trusting that God would give him the family he'd promised even though his wife Sarai could not have children.

That's what Christian people are called to as they begin a life with Jesus Christ - trust into the unknown, trusting Jesus' lead even when it doesn't look like it should work on paper. But here's the thing that Genesis 12:10-20 teaches us - we do fall off track.

This passage that we look at today is a wonderful opportunity for those of us who are Christians to remind ourselves, and to gladly confess to all of you who aren't Christians, we are still broken people who keep messing up and getting it wrong. We're not holier-than-thou, better-than-you, goody-two-shoes. God's Word teaches us not to be surprised by that, really.

In the space of one verse, Abram tumbles from the heights of trusting God in the unknown, to dropping his trust in God and trying to make his own way with his own plan. In v.9, Abram is heading 'towards the Negev' - going physically in the direction that God was calling him to. But in v.10, when famine threatens that land, we're told that Abram decided to change course and head for Egypt, where famine was not an issue.

Seems like a sensible enough plan, right? 'There's no food here, so I'd better go to where there is food.' The problem is, Abram's turning his back on the direction that God had called him to and the first point where God's lead seems to be confusing. And Abram is taking matters into his own hands and making decisions without consulting the God He had begun to trust.

Throughout the Bible, we read about all sorts of characters getting into all sorts of crises and dilemmas. Sometimes, we read about God's people consulting God and asking for His lead. Other times, we read about them forgetting to do that or ignoring God's call, and taking matters into their own hands. And when they do that, things go wrong.

Abram has replaced his trust of God with a fear of circumstances - fleeing to Egypt on account of the famine; and also a fear of men - lying to the Egyptians about Sarai, telling them that she was his sister rather than his wife. And that exchange of 'trust in God' for 'dealing with it myself' has happened all so surprisingly soon after Abram's initial all-out faith in the Lord.

On the face of it, Abram's plan seems to go well enough, actually. He had been worried about the Egyptians killing him to get him out the way so that they could take Sarai as a wife, but by telling them she was his sister, they would negotiate and even pay him for Sarai to become theirs. In the end, Pharaoh himself takes an interest in Sarai and adds her to his harem of

women. You couldn't get a wealthier person to sell your wife to. And the whole story ends with Abram leaving, still alive, with Sarai, and with more riches than they began the whole thing with.

And yet, this is a story of failure. Abram's plan seems to have gone well. But that's only true for Abram, of course. It didn't go well for Sarai, who was sold to another man to have sex with her. It didn't go well for Pharaoh or his whole large household, whom we are told in v.17 suffered serious illness on account of 'Abram's wife Sarai.'

And how well did it go for Abram, really? Instead of venturing in the direction of the land God had called him to with the promise of that land and a family to come, here he was in Egypt, alone in a tent, far from the promised land, even further from the promise of family with his wife now in the arms of another man, *knowing* that he was very far from all that God had called him to.

This was a *mistake* that Abram made. After coming to faith in the living Lord God, he still made mistakes - and pretty quickly, too. As he stopped trusting all that God was calling him to, and started relying on his own wits, he became concerned with self-protection, bringing harm on others around him and stepping backwards in his walk with God.

That happens. Christians - God's people - the Church - still make mistakes and turn from God's lead as their lives go on. It's not that God's Word says that's okay. God *calls* us to trust Him, and you read throughout the Bible of how He disciplines those He loves when they stray from His lead. And there are consequences for ourselves and for other people around us when Christians mess up.

For those of us here today who are Christians, let God's Word here be a warning to us about the responsibility we have on our shoulders. Last week, we saw that amazingly, God chooses us not just to be blessed by Him, but to be blessings for Him to other people in this world.

As we follow God's revealed will and lead for our lives, we have a huge potential to bless other people and do them a lot of good, and to make Jesus Christ known and attractive to a world that needs to know Him.

Equally though, as with Abram in this passage, when we disobey God, stop trusting Him and start taking matters into our own hands; we degenerate into self-concern, and have a huge potential to do a lot of harm to others around

us, and to give a bad name to Jesus and to His church which is the place He intends people to find life, hope, healing and salvation.

All of that is to say, how much you are trusting and obeying Jesus as His disciple has a big impact not only on your own life and spiritual health, but on those you are rubbing shoulders with. Are you being a blessing or a curse to others? That will depend on how far you're taking God at His Word.

For those of us here today who aren't Christians, I think the Christians amongst us just want to acknowledge the reality before you today that we Christians are still broken, messed up people. It's my hope and prayer that over months and years, Jesus *is changing us* to become more like Him, and that you will notice that in your friend or family member - the reality that knowing the real and living God makes for real and living transformation in a human being.

Yet, along the way, we do mess up, and hurt you and offend you and put you off church and Jesus and all that's truly life-saving. So we want to say sorry about that. I think many of us will have had experiences of church being a place that is judgmental, hypocritical, dull, depressing or even damaging. And for that, we're sorry.

Because it's in our being sorry that we return to a life that trusts in and celebrates the forgiveness, life and wholeness that God extends to us in Christ. And as Christians, we are people who know that saying sorry and returning to the lead God calls us to follow is always possible and desirable. That offer is not only for those following Jesus now - it's for all of us here, to start following Him now or start following Him again.

*Question/Reflection - Where have I strayed from God's lead in my life? What do I need to say 'sorry' to God for?*

People often assume when they read a story in the Bible that the person we're reading about is an example to copy. Abram, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, King David, Jesus' disciples in the New Testament, Paul - these big characters in the Bible have all lived in ways that do show what faith in God looks like.

But they also all messed up, most of them in really big ways. They were sinful, broken human beings too - because that's who God calls to know and belong to Him - and it's not that we're supposed to read about everything they did and copy it as if it all had God's approval.

Sometimes, the Bible passages tell us outright whether God was pleased or displeased with what a person did. This passage doesn't actually comment either way. We certainly don't read of God approving of Abram's sly schemes; but neither do we read of God condemning them.

That suggests that what Abram did right and what Abram did wrong is not really the main point in this story at all. The main point is that God acted to make sure that His promises and purposes were not thwarted. Abram was a man to whom God had promised land and a family that would become a great nation. And God keeps His promises.

Much of the book of Genesis is about the promises God gives to His people, and it narrates either how those promises are advanced towards being delivered, or how those promises are threatened, and how God acts to overcome every seemingly impossible obstacle.

Genesis 12:10-20 is a passage where the promises are threatened. Abram's far from the land God called Him to, and his prospects of family are tied up with a wife who can't conceive who is locked away in a Pharaoh's harem. But God intervenes in v.17, inflicting diseases on Pharaoh and his household which cause Pharaoh to end up 'giving Sarai back' and sending Abram on his way back to where he came from - back to where God had been leading him.

God did something that only God could do to see that His plan and His people were back on track. So in 13:1, we'll find Abram back on the way to the Negev, back on the journey God had called him to.

That's how God operates with broken sinners. It's only those who know they need God who put their lives in His hands. We make mistakes and go off track. But time and again, we've seen God call us out on that and call us back to trusting and obeying Him. And we've seen *His faithfulness* to us despite *our faithlessness*. We've experienced God's getting-us-back-on-track with Him, His day-by-day forgiveness, time and again.

That's our lives as church. Church is not for people who think they're good. It's for people who are ready to confess that they're not, and they need forgiven. Church is not for people who believe they're fine and need nothing. It's for people who know they want a solution to guilt, suffering, hopelessness, identity, fragility and death. No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me. This is the offer of Christ to you. Do you want to come back next week?