

**Pentecost 8**  
**18/7/2021**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Ephesians 2:11-22**  
**Psalm 90**

**How things look from here**

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*In a sentence*

*God embraces every 'here' and 'there' of our lives, and so we are never outside of God's 'house'*

We were, of course, anticipating a conversation this afternoon around the theme of the future shape and location of the life of the Mark the Evangelist congregation. Yet, here we are staring at screens again, with that conversation probably a good month away!

I've decided, however, to continue with the sermon which I'd planned as a prelude to that conversation because what we need to consider as a congregation is not confined to one day and one conversation, and neither is what we are to decide only about our future.

Let's then, through what we have heard today from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, consider 'How things look from here'. We consider this in view of the fact that we have resolved not to continue to seek to fix Union Memorial Church, and have resolved to make preparations to sell the site.

From here, we look towards a period of significant change – change about which we don't yet know very much. 'Not here' doesn't tell us much about 'where'!

We are, of course, well-resourced and have a range of viable options before us. Yet, because we are not *forced* to do any particular thing, we fall in the realm of *responsibility*, on two fronts. The first is the front the gospel presents. We want to be peculiarly Christian in what we do, and so such themes as mission, community and worship are important for us. Yet, it's by no means clear what would be the *best* way for us to be Christian in our decisions – assuming, of course, that there *is* a 'best' way.

The second front of our responsibility here is to each other. We are called respond to the gospel *together*, as part of a community. This includes not only ourselves as the congregation but also the wider church. Yet God has the most irritating habit of whispering into the ears of each of us different ideas about the best shape of that response. At least, it will seem that way when it comes to making decisions that matter. Yet, out of these murmurings must come a determination, unless we opt for a status quo.

And the status quo always seems to hold some promise, for it carries its own kind of peace. We are still where we are today because we can live with it all, given what benefits it provides, even if these are not all the benefits we (or God) might look for.

How things look from here, then, is a rather fraught. We sense that God wants something of us, and the church wants something of us, and we want something of each other. Yet, from here, the 'there' of our next life is not only different but is an uncertain and potentially risky place.

Our reading from Ephesians this morning features an account of ‘here’ and ‘there’ which is important for our own situation as a congregation, although Paul begins with the ‘there’ and moves to the ‘here’.

The community to which he writes is Gentile, and he reminds them of the ‘there’ of their previous lives. Then, they were ‘outside’ – outside the covenantal promises of God. This location is expressed relative to a ‘house’. House-language runs right through the last few verses of today’s reading, although our English translation obscures the connections. A more literal translation than we heard today might run like this:

*<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and outside the house [NRSV aliens], but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole house [NRSV structure] is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are made a house [NRSV built together spiritually into] – [a spiritual] house [NRSV a dwelling place] for God.<sup>1</sup>*

Paul tells of the movement of the Gentiles: you were outside the house but now you are members of the household of God.

Yet, this is no mere ‘coming inside’. Paul’s house-talk morphs through the passage. He begins with the notion that there is ‘a’ house which God has, implying other houses which God does not have – including the Gentiles themselves. By the end, however, the Gentiles – with the Jews – are *made into* God’s own house: a ‘dwelling place’ for God.

This lovely image is moving in itself but it has a far-reaching implication. From the outside there is a fundamental inside-outside division. Yet, once the Gentiles ‘come in’, there *is no longer* any outside. There is no ‘there’ which is outside God. From inside there is nowhere else we *can* be but within the household of God.

Paul is dealing with the Jew-Gentile question. We sometimes reduce this to an account of how God overcomes difference, but reconciliation is the *effect* of something more basic: that God incorporates all things.

What this means for us is that where we are, there God is and where we will be there *God* will be. This is a dangerous thing to hold, and it should only be said in hushed tones with evangelical fear and trembling: we believe in the church; we believe that our ‘here’ is God’s ‘here’, and that our ‘there’ will be God’s ‘here’ as well.

The promise in our decision about what happens next for Mark the Evangelist is not in our cunning or calculation. The promise is that God will be there, because for us there is nothing and no-one outside of God.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Oikos’/house appears in the Greek as part of various compound words which yield the different translations we have into English. It is also worth noting that the idea of ‘city’ (Greek, ‘polis’) – closely related to that of ‘house’ – also appears a couple of times in the whole passage: v.19 citi-zens, v.12 citi-zenship (NRSV translates this as ‘commonwealth’).

The eighth-century thinker Alcuin of York once observed that place is finally irrelevant in what passes between us and God. Had place really the power to make a difference, the angels would never have rebelled in heaven, nor Adam and Eve in paradise. The question is what we make of the promised presence of God in the place in which we find ourselves.

In our deliberations over the next few months, let us not imagine that we are reaching for heaven or for paradise or even for some approximation to these, as if our calling is to get the place right, as if there is a 'there' which is radically different than, and more promising than, 'here'.

Of course, there is much to be said for a place which is comfortable, convenient and which we have some confidence will serve God's mission well. Yet let us note that *comfort* and *convenience* and *confidence* are 'communal' words, 'with' words (Latin, *con/com* = 'with'). To 'comfort' is to strengthen-alongside. *Convenient* is 'convene-able' – amenable to our coming together. 'Confident' means to believe or trust with others.

The comfortable, convenient, confident place is properly a communal one. And so the place we seek – the very temple of God – is the place we are called *to become*.

But neither are we *yet* to become this. We are indeed imperfect here and now but will not be less so in our next shape. Being the dwelling place of God is not something we are about to choose but is our calling here and now: today, in our conversations over the next few months, in the transition period and in the new place, whatever it is. Yet, as our calling, it is also God's gift: in being the community of faith we are given the object of faith, even God.

This is to say that our 'here' and our 'there' are – in God – the same place, because the fundament – the basis – of here and there is what God is making and will make of us in Christ. We are God's now and will be then. We do not, then, choose more of God in the next step apart from choosing more of each other, for that is where God will be found: among the living stones which constitute God's own home, even us.

There is *freedom* in this. It is not incumbent upon us to find God in our next thing, for God has already found us. To know ourselves as found and then made God's home is to have no place we can go where God is not already there.

We have, then, work to do but it is a work which declares that God is with us, and not which anxiously seeks to find God.

This is work, then, we can do without fear of recrimination from God or each other.

Work like this would scarcely be work, at all.

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