

**Southover People: chosen, royal and holy** – Matthew 16:13-20 + 1 Peter 2:4-10  
10<sup>th</sup> April 2011 @ 10am

**Introduction**

Good morning everyone

Well, we've reached chapter 16 verses 13-20 in our Sunday morning journey through Matthew's Gospel. So, it'd be helpful if you'd grab a pew Bible and open it on page 983

Today many are questioning the validity of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. You'd expect this to be the case from those outside the church. But surprisingly there's movements even within Christianity that are suggesting that perhaps church isn't the best expression of God in the world.

Instead, they're suggesting that individuals should actually just "be the church" by staying at home or getting together in informal arrangements of house groups and the like. Why not just meet occasionally at Café Nero, say, read a few Scriptures, and hang out with each other for a while.

Isn't that, they say, a perfectly satisfactory way of being church together?

So, it's a good time to be going back to basics and looking at the whole business of the local church and its importance. And in particular, why regular and ongoing commitment to the church that Jesus founded is still absolutely vital for you and for me in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

But before we do that, we're going to look at the church's founder, Jesus.

So, got that? Part 1 is all about Jesus; part 2 is all about his church

**Who is Jesus? Vv 13-17**

*During a children's sermon the vicar said to the children, "I'm going to describe something to you and I want you to tell me what it is. This thing I have in mind is bushy-tailed, it eats nuts and it runs up and down trees. What is it?"*

*After a long pause, one of the older youngsters raised her hand. "Well it sounds a lot like a squirrel to me, but I've been around here long enough to know that the right answer is always Jesus."*

Exactly who is Jesus? There probably isn't a more controversial and debated religious question in the entire world. Although people on every side of the debate agree that Jesus is perhaps the most influential person who ever lived, they can't agree who he is.

The question certainly isn't a new one. In fact, it was even around during his life, as Jesus' incredible activities attracted disciples, enraged the establishment, and aroused curiosity among the masses. Just who is Jesus?

Let's look at what our passage has to say:

<sup>13</sup> *When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"*

<sup>14</sup> They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

In Jesus' day people mainly focussed on the idea that Jesus was some sort of prophet.

Today, the only real consensus among non Christians is that Jesus couldn't have been God. If you went out on the streets of Lewes this afternoon, and asked who Jesus was, you'd probably get one of five responses:

1. "I haven't a clue! Was he a real person?" Sadly this response is becoming increasingly common in the UK, as we dismantle our Christian heritage
2. Jesus was a Good Man. This is probably the most popular idea of who Jesus was. A lot of people would say, "Jesus was a really good man, who lived a long time ago."
3. Jesus was a Reformer. This view says that Jesus was a 1<sup>st</sup> century Martin Luther. He never meant to establish a religion. He was just trying to bring reform to the corrupt and antiquated system of Judaism.
4. Jesus was a Revolutionary. This was a popular view in the 60's and basically said that Jesus was someone who came to overthrow social structures and usher in a new community
5. The 'first among equals' Jesus. In this view, Jesus may have been God, or a path to God, but he didn't claim exclusivity. This Jesus is willing to share the stage with Moses and Confucius and Gandhi and Buddha and Mohammed, as simply one among many ways to God

Do you notice something about these views – apart from the fact that they're all wrong that is?

They're all just opinions. They're someone's opinions.

Maybe some are well thought-out opinions.

But they're still just opinions

The problem with all these views is that they have absolutely no authority behind them, to back them up.

As Christians, we don't do opinion! We base our view of Jesus on one source and one source alone.

We base it on the Bible.

We believe that the Bible is God's authoritative word. And so we make our claims about Jesus from there.

Let's go back to our passage:

<sup>15</sup> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

<sup>17</sup> *Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*

There isn't a clearer statement of who Jesus is, than in these three verses:  
Not only does Peter clearly and unambiguously say that Jesus is the Son of God, but Jesus commends him strongly for saying it.  
And he states that God himself has revealed this to Peter.

There are lots of other reasons in the Bible why we believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God:  
He fulfilled over 100 Old Testament prophecies during his lifetime  
He claimed to be God – if you've any doubts about this just read John's Gospel  
He had supernatural power and performed miracles  
He was raised from the dead – as we'll be celebrating on Easter Sunday in two weeks time

So, who is Jesus? Jesus is the Son of God. He's God!

So when Jesus speaks we need to listen!  
Especially when he talks about his great love: the church. His church  
And that's what we're going to look at now in part 2

### **Jesus' Church vv18-20**

Today it seems that the church in the Western world is struggling. It's struggling both numbers-wise and influence-wise – even among those who would call themselves Christian.

There's probably four main reasons for this:

1. Sadly some Christians have been wounded by their experience of church. Church communities aren't filled with perfect people and people have been damaged in them.
2. The church has caused a lot of hurt in the world. It's an accusation that's often made and unfortunately it's sometimes justified. Just think Crusades, or questionable church-state tie-ups, or the church's blindness to abuses like the holocaust.
3. Church isn't viewed as necessary anymore. I can worship God at home – I don't need to go to church. And there's seems some justification for this view:  
There's a virtual flood of good, solid biblical teaching available on a variety of media  
You can get preaching on TV and on the radio  
You can get podcasts and download sermons  
You can watch webcasts of church services  
There are even online church communities
4. Church isn't a priority in people's lives. We live such fragmented, busy lives as 21<sup>st</sup> century believers. We're always busy working, building our families, trying to get ahead or at least not fall behind. Or we're just desperate for some time off. Some time to ourselves. And so church attendance pays the price

This last idea that church isn't a priority in our culture, is probably the main reason why most people aren't committed to church. And it's tough to argue against it.

But I do know this: that persistent, faithful, committed participation in a local body of believers is vital for the spiritual wellbeing of every Christian.

So, I'm going to give you four reasons, why commitment to the church is vital for you and for me.

And while I'm doing this, I'm hoping that you'll also see just how much God himself values his church.

### *1. The church is the witness of God to the world*

The first reason why commitment to the church is important is this: The church is the witness of God to the world

From the very opening pages of Scripture, we read of the desire and purpose of God to express his glory through humanity. In Genesis we read that humans were created in the very image of God. Which means we have worth and purpose and meaning and design.

God created Adam and Even to reflect his glory. But they fell, bringing sin and death and evil into the world.

When Jesus came, to put things right again, he declared that God would reflect his glory in the world through a new expression called the church.

As it says in our passage:

<sup>18</sup> *And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*

<sup>19</sup> *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

The meaning of the word, 'church' in the New Testament, comes from a Greek word, "Ekklesia" which means "the assembly of those who have been called out of the world to follow Jesus Christ."

This tells us that the Christian church isn't about buildings – it's about people.

And Peter himself picks up this idea in his first letter, where he describes Christians as being like living stones being built into a spiritual house, the church

He goes on to say this about the church:

<sup>9</sup> *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

We're to proclaim the praises of the God who's rescued us to a glorious future

As one writer's put it: "As God's people, the local church is God's showcase"

God's purpose for the church is to be a witness to him in the world. And if that's the purpose for the church generally then it's also true for us here at Southover too: Southover Church is set apart to be a witness to God in the world: And, amazing as it may seem, Peter tells us that we're a chosen people, a royal priesthood and a holy nation

## *2. The church is the place where God dwells*

The second reason why we're to be committed to the church is that it's the place where God dwells

In Ephesians 1, Paul introduces the idea of the church as Christ's body. (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Think about this for a moment:

Paul's saying that we, the church, are the physical manifestations of Christ's body in the world.

Jesus himself said: *"Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them"* (Matthew 18:20)

Now let's be clear: Jesus is omnipresent. Omnipresent is simply a big word that means he's everywhere.

It means you can meet Jesus anywhere, know Jesus anywhere, walk with Jesus anywhere:

You don't have to be in a church building

You don't have to be sitting in a pew

You don't have to be on your knees in front of an altar

You don't even have to be talking to Steve!

What Paul's saying is this: Although you can experience God anywhere, you experience the fullness of God when you're in the midst of other believers and in fellowship with them.

Or to put it another way:

It is possible to have a relationship and a walk with God, without being part of a vibrant church community. But if you do, you're missing out on so much of what God's got for you. It's a bit like you're sipping from the glass instead of drinking deeply.

When you're part of a church, you're part of something larger than yourself.

## *3. The church is the best environment for your spiritual growth*

So, the church is the witness of God to the world and the place where God dwells.

And thirdly, the church is the best environment for your spiritual growth

The Bible's clear that humans are created for community. In the Garden of Eden, God said *"It is not good for man to be alone."* (Genesis 2:18)

We flourish best when we live in relation to, and submission to, others.

Down through history, God's plan is for his people to live out their faith in community. He doesn't call an individual, he calls a people.

It's this idea of community that the Apostle Paul shares in his letter to the Ephesian church.

One of the problems with our 21<sup>st</sup> century church is that we can be too individualistic. In the (seemingly good) desire to satisfy our own spiritual growth, we can hop from church to church, seeking the best worship experience and the best amenities.

Now in one sense there's nothing wrong with that. But we also need to look at the church as a place to give, and to serve, and to build up the faith of others.

C.S. Lewis said: "The church is not a human society of people united by their natural affinities, but the body of Christ, in which all members, however different must share the common life, complementing and helping one another precisely by their difference."

Paul's focus in Ephesians is that the church is the best place – perhaps the only place – where your faith can grow and thrive. Furthermore, he affirms that the church relies on everybody doing their part.

That's the beauty of the church: everyone has something to give, something to contribute.

I want to challenge you, if you don't already have a role in the church, get plugged in. Move from being a consumer at Southover to being a contributor to our community

Some of you are good at cutting grass – we can use your help to cut ours  
Some of you have cars – we can use your help with transport  
Some of you are good with your hands  
Some of you love children – we have children's work that needs more leaders  
Some of you are good at hospitality  
Some of you are prayer warriors – we certainly need your prayers

Billy Graham captured it beautifully: "Churchgoers are like coals of fire. When they cling together, they keep the flame aglow; when they separate, they die out."

#### *4. The church is the love of God's heart*

So, the church is the best environment for your spiritual growth.  
And finally, we should be active in Jesus' church because it's the love of God's heart.

God loves the church: The church is often called the Bride of Christ.

Jesus sacrificed himself for it

He says in our passage this morning that he himself is its builder, and he promised that it'll never be destroyed.

What does this mean for us?

Well what about this?

If God loves the church – shouldn't we love it?

If God defends the church – shouldn't we defend it?

If God cares about the church – shouldn't we care about it?

If God loves the church – shouldn't we seek its growth and prosperity and expanded influence, with all our might?

### **Conclusion**

So what have we seen this morning?

We've seen that Jesus is no less than the Son of God himself

We've seen that the church is Jesus' precious and indestructible creation, which he continues to build, using us as living stones.

And we've seen that no matter how imperfect the church is in practice, and it certainly is, if we're Jesus' disciples, we're commanded to get involved in it:

So make coming to church a priority – don't let other things get in the way

Come to church ready to learn and be transformed – and grow and develop spiritually as a result

Become a contributor to Southover – rather than only a consumer

Grow in your love for others at Southover by getting to know them better

Use your gifts and abilities to serve others in our community

Invite people to our Easter services

Help Southover to become the friendliest church in the whole of Sussex, not just in Lewes.

(Imagine the impact on our numbers if everyone who ever came to Southover stayed because we made them feel so welcome!)

Finally don't forget to come to the annual church meeting in two weeks time – both to show your support and to contribute to our plans for the future

Let's be blunt: no church will ever be perfect, and Southover certainly isn't, because all churches are filled with sinners like you and me.

But the local church is where God has called you and me to fulfil his purpose in the world.

And for most of us here that local church means Southover:

So, love and cherish it just as God does

And serve your Lord Jesus Christ by investing yourself deeply in the life and community here at Southover

### **Prayer**