

THE CHURCH: PEOPLE OR BUILDINGS?

(1 Corinthians 3.9-17 and Matthew 16.13-20)

We begin today a series of four talks on the big questions. Thank you to everyone who submitted a question. The one allocated to me is, as your pew sheet says; "Is the church a building or people and why is it needed?"

The church – building or people? Answer – yes.

In the English language the word "church" means several different things including places of worship and the congregations of people who go there.

Of course, there are many beautiful churches, chapels and cathedrals, usually quite old and expensive to maintain. You are sitting in one this morning.

If you ask someone "Where's the church in Long Newton?" no one would say, "Well, the treasurer lives here, the lady who does the flowers lives there, the church warden is at the shops and the pastoral assistant on holiday." They will say, "Down the road on the left, opposite the pub." People associate the word "church" with buildings like this.

But did you know that for the first 300 years of Christianity there were no church buildings? Christians gathered for worship in open public spaces and in people's homes. So, in the Bible, the word "church" never refers to buildings.

If this building were burned to the ground tonight the church would still exist in this village.

Take the church building in MSG as proof of what I'm saying. The building was condemned about ten years ago because it was unsafe.

So the congregation moved into the local school and it grew in size. When building work went on here, the congregation moved into the Wilson Centre – and our membership grew in size there too. So buildings are not the essence of church and can actually be a hindrance to growth.

I conducted a wedding yesterday. If I asked someone there, "What's this wedding about?" they might reply "Well, it's rings, a white dress, flowers, confetti, a marriage certificate, speeches, toasts, a cake."

And yes, of course, but those are the accessories. That's not the essence of a wedding. It's something much more profound; two lives being joined as one by God.

In the same way, at the heart of the church is something amazing and beautiful and glorious, much more than buildings.

Actually, in the Bible, church is never about buildings. When Jesus said in our Gospel reading "I will build my church" he wasn't thinking about stained glass and naves and chancels.

The word translated "church" in our Bibles is *ecclesia* from which you get words like ecclesiastical. But it actually means an assembly of citizens, a community of people.

The confusing thing is this; though the Bible never says the church is a building, it does say that the people who make up the church are like a building.

In 1 Peter 2 it says that "we Christians are a building made out of living stones."

In Ephesians 2 it says, "You are ...members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

What that means is simply this: the church (the people) is where God's presence is felt. The particular building we are compared to is a temple because the temple in the OT is where God's presence manifested itself.

This is why Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am also." Jesus lives in the midst of his people and he reveals himself when his people come together.

Why is the church needed? Because the world needs to experience the power of God's presence.

If you love somebody, what you long for, more than anything is to have them with you. Photos are all right, telephone calls are fine. It's nice to read letters or text messages from the person you love. But what you long for, what you yearn for, is their presence.

Sometimes people say, when they walk into a service of worship, "there's something amazing about the atmosphere here." Often what they are sensing is the presence of God. That's why church is so wonderful. We are coming into the presence of God.

In our first reading, the church is compared to a building with foundations, and structures made of different materials.

Have you seen that programme on ITV, "New Homes from Hell"? It's a documentary about people who have invested good money in bricks and mortar only to find their new house is worthless because of rogue workmanship. Each time I've watched it there's been a problem with the foundations.

Ask any contractor and he will tell you that a building is only as good as its foundation. If the foundation is too shallow, too weak, too lightweight, made of the wrong materials or too near an underground stream - the building is doomed. No matter what you build on it, it's a waste of time. But if the foundation is solid, the building will stand.

In 1 Corinthians 3.11 it says, "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

There's only one foundation possible for a healthy church. It's not clever philosophy or public opinion or management technique or even moral values or spirituality or religious tradition. It's Jesus Christ. He underpins every thriving church and every healthy Christian.

Build your life on him.

Once the foundation is laid, you don't get cowboys in to do slapdash work with cheap materials.

Churches that look impressive on the outside but are spiritually weak on the inside don't grow. Verse 10 says "Each one should build with care."

Verse 12 is a metaphor about how we go about being church. It says you can use quality tools and materials. Or you can go for the cheap option - and cut corners. It means this; everything we do in church should be the very best we can do it, not careless, slapdash and ill-prepared.

And here's the point: if church life is like a building site, constructing something beautiful and enduring on the foundation of Jesus Christ, v13-15 say there's going to be a site inspection.

The quality of your Christian commitment - and mine - is all going to be tested.

Will what we build stand up? If it's been built on the right foundation - Jesus - and with quality materials - faith, hope and love, then it will.

So church is people. It's family. You can choose your friends but you cannot choose your family. Look around you today. These are your brothers and your sisters! If you're not a Christian yet, they are your potential brothers and sisters! I don't know whether that encourages you to become a Christian or not!

What is the church for? To answer that, I need to mention another image in the Bible and it's the body of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12.27 it says, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

John has one body. There's only one John Greenwood. In the same way in the church we all belong to *one* body.

But John has arms, legs, lungs, a head, muscles, bones, joints, a heart... each part has a different function and makes the whole work better.

Every part of the body is dependent on the rest. The brain can't say to the liver, "I can think perfectly well without you." We all need each other within the body of Christ.

Do you know anyone who has had a kidney transplant, or who has been a donor? Apparently you can survive with only one kidney. It's amazing what you can do without in your body.

You can manage without your legs. You can do without your arms. You can live without your eyes. In fact, you can do without most of your face. You don't need your ears necessarily, you can cope without a nose, you can survive without most of your tongue.

But, frankly, it gives a picture of something which isn't very pretty! And sadly, the church, the body of Christ, can be unattractive because some members are detached and isolated. But, when everyone is involved, then the church is very attractive indeed.

There are two ways into this church building; through the main door and through the chapel door. But there's only one way into the church as God's people and that's to say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

Jesus accepts us just as we are and he says, "I want you to be part my body so that when people see you working together they will be as attracted to you as they were to me when I was walking the earth."

I want you to be the bricks and mortar of a holy temple in which people will experience my presence when they are among you."