

Texts: Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 & Ephesians 2:11-22

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### **Introduction**

We are right now becoming the generation that in one hundred years will be described as *“those people who lived through the pandemic”*. Our grandchildren will ask what it was like to go months without seeing our own grandparents, parents or friends or months without hugging our love ones or neighbours or friends. Life for all of us has been crazy, weird, and different beyond anything we considered ‘normal’.

### **Let us pray...**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God who welcome strangers and aliens. AMEN.*

The pandemic has played havoc with our mental health, and a significant factor in our unease is that we’re missing our people— terribly. We long for friends, family and colleagues. We are created for connection, and with the need for social distancing and the reality of being away from the workplace – and everything else – for such a long period of time, we are struggling.

My life has undergone significant transitions and changes in the last 18 months. I have to confess that the pandemic has affected me physically, I am less healthy and have gained weight. It has affected my mental health, especially last year when we had the heavy lockdowns. Staying in my apartment alone wasn’t fun. I am a people person.

The reality is that living through this pandemic is not easy or much fun for most of us. It is sort of the worst of times. Lives being lost, lots of people losing their jobs, whole industries closed, businesses shutting down, kids not going to school with their friends, no one seeing family for ages, and awful predictions of everything for our shared future.

I’m almost always optimistic, but geez it’s been hard to hold that position with the pandemic.

This brings us to **BELONGING**. This crazy space where we feel we’re right where we’re meant to be, alongside those we’re meant to be next to. Where we are accepted, welcomed, even needed. Where we are relaxed and comfy to turn up as we really are. We can be lost, confused and where necessary, we can lean on others and know they’ll catch us. Just like we catch them. Why does all of this matter?

Because when we feel like that – when we feel like we truly belong – we are at our most confident. Because everyone has a desire to belong. We pursue clubs, groups, gangs, and other networks to fill the relational needs in our lives.

We rely on others, we openly collaborate, we support others, we ask for help when we need it and offer it when others do. We trust and we're trustworthy. We thrive and we cheer others on as they thrive alongside us. Knowing each other and getting along well. Having the freedom to be ourselves. By being accountable to each other and right there when we need each other.

While BELONGING is always important to every one of us, it matters more than ever, right now.

*One of my psychological heroes, late American psychotherapist Carl Rogers said towards the end of his working life that when any of his clients came to a full realisation of who they are, it was always to realise that they belonged somewhere – that trying to find out who they were, in isolation, was a fruitless quest. It's a fruitless quest for any of us. You can only make sense of who you are by the context in which you operate. By the people you belong to; the families, the neighbourhoods, the communities, the workplace, the church etcetera. That's our true nature.*

I love neuroscience. Neuroscientists – who are now capable of peeping into our brains in a way that we couldn't have imagined even 30 years ago – tell us now they can find the cooperative centre in the brain. They can't find the competitive centre. Being cooperative, being community creatures is part of our nature genetically. Being competitive, being rampant individuals is something we learn.

Chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the saints in Ephesus opens with an exposition of the lavish mercy and love of God by which we who were 'dead in sin' are made 'alive with Christ'. Paul makes it clear that this divine action has been concerned to create a new entity in the world by which God brings blessing to the nations and through which God displays the glory of his grace to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms. And Paul is concerned that we understand that this new reality to which the church bears witness is inseparably identified with Jesus Christ – that is, all we have and all we are and all we will ever be is now *in Christ*. And then, from verses 11–22, Paul unpacks something of what it means to be *in Christ*. He talks about circumcision and uncircumcision. He talks about the commonwealth of Israel and about a new kind of citizenship. And he talks about the household of God and of a new temple in which God dwells by the Spirit.

The regions around the Mediterranean during the First Century were made up of a vast number of culturally - and ethnically-diverse groups. But in all of that, there existed no greater cultural or religious divide as that between Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) – a divide most obvious when it came to issues pertaining to the temple.

Both groups had a different understanding of history and of where history is heading, a different understanding of who God is, a different understanding of revelation, a different understanding of worship, a different understanding of why we are here, a different understanding of how to live together as human community. And along with these different understandings was a deep hatred for one another that went both ways. It was mutual so to speak. The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentiles. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations he had made ... It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. They had mutual disdain for each other.

However, according to Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, *“<sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.”* Clearly for Paul, Christ Jesus came to break down the dividing walls between the Jews and the Gentiles.

The Apostle Paul said it like this in Ephesians 2:19-22, as paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, *“That’s plain enough, isn’t it? You’re no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.”*

Paul is clear, we belong to the household of God. And we are the household of God!

The New Testament uses the word “Body” or “Body of Christ” as a metaphor of church. Each part of the body has a different role. Similarly, each one of us has different roles in the body of Christ.

The word Church (Ekklesia) comes from two Greek words, “Ek” which means ‘out’, “Kaleo” which means ‘to call’. So *Ekklesia* (Church) means – called out ones. Thus, it means that the church is a group of people who are called out from the worldly kingdom, kingdom of competing to an inverse kin-dom, a kin-dom of compassion to be a special people to serve the living and loving God.

I really don’t like the phrase, “I am going to church” or “I am attending church.” We really need to remember the church is not a building which we go to, or denominations or social activities you take up. The church is the Body of Christ which is you and me, all of us.

Ephesians 2:19 Paul begins to describe that brand new identity and belonging.

**Whenever you feel Unloved, Unimportant or insecure, remember to whom you belong.**

We belong, not just to God, and not just to God’s kin-dom in some abstract sense, but to the community of our fellow citizens. Ephesians 2:19 underscores the relational quality of our citizenship by adding, “you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” We are also God’s relatives, members of God’s family. What good news it is to hear “you are no longer strangers!”

Friends, God in Jesus loves the “strangers” because God understands how it feels to be a stranger. Remember, it was said of Jesus *“He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own[d] did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name”* (John 1:10-12)

There is something special about learning how to welcome the stranger and the alien into our communities. I believe there is something powerful about the ability to see past temporary differences and the fear of the “stranger” that plugs into the grace of God to heal us and make us the people we were created to be. Conversely, the inability to make a home for the “stranger” among us is a deep affront to the spirit of the Message of Jesus, which is meant for the whole world. The struggle, and it really is a struggle, to see this new and open community embrace all kinds of people from all kinds of backgrounds runs counter to the self-centred habits of “protecting” the tribe or allowing the tribe to be “infiltrated” by “strangers.”

But everyone who has been gripped by this fear and this xenophobia has always been on the dying end of their existence. In attempting to “protect” their tribe, they’ve only hastened its disappearance and irrelevancy.

I NOW come to the place in the reflection that asks, “Are we doing this?” Are we showing love to the stranger? Are we embracing the stranger? We ask this of ourselves, personally. Do I seek out and welcome the stranger? We ask this as a congregation. Is our congregation a hospitable congregation?

We also ask this of ourselves as a society and a nation. Are we as a nation showing love to the stranger?

The answer, I am afraid, is YES and NO. Yes, we have welcomed refugees and asylum seekers.

However, we have locked up refugees against their will for more than seven years. We don’t have to punish people seeking asylum. Australia has a duty of care to the vulnerable people who come here seeking refuge. But instead, people seeking asylum are dumped off-shore and their basic rights are neglected.

But it is not only a question of welcoming the refugee, the alien, the stranger into our country and into our communities. It is also a matter of how we treat the “foreigners or aliens” who already, live among us. Often our views of those different from us, those from another country or culture, who speak different languages, are too often negative and discriminatory. Have we forgotten that in Jesus Christ, God turned the light of his face on us strangers so that we might welcome as his children, members of his household?

Have we so forgotten our place that we have forgotten the place the stranger has among us?

It’s time for us to take stock of our community to see if the Message of Jesus has so transformed you as to be free enough to embrace the rejected and marginalized in our society.

Today, let us continue to practice the Christian hospitality of love and embrace and let us forever reject any notion that reduces our Cosmic Lord, the Uncreated God, to a mere tribal deity. Surely the Kin-dom of God is for everyone. If it isn’t then it isn’t God’s kin-dom, but a mere temporary “club” whose demise is already planted deeply in its closed heart.

Let it be said of Christians that we believe in Christ Jesus, the compassionate one and in him there is “no longer strangers and aliens”.

We welcome everyone into the household of God, God’s family!

AMEN