

Priesthood of All Believers: Sunday 10th December 2017

1 Peter 2:4-10/Exodus 19:1-6

Mark has just left college, and wonders what job to do. He's a Christian and has been involved in ministry. But he is also a gifted linguist, and is predicted a first. He could easily get on a Masters course. But he wrestles with what God would want him to do - which is more spiritual?

Rob and Jenny are in their 40s, with a young family. Both busy people - Jenny is a teacher, Rob self-employed. They are both hospitable; they go to a big church with a large staff team. They think - we don't really need to get involved - that's other people's job, and besides, we're too busy.

Sarah used to go to church as a child, but recently discovered a living faith. She works shifts, and sometimes has to miss Sundays. So she struggles in her faith because some days she doesn't feel so close to God; so she thinks 'I should go to church more', that's where I can feel close to God again.

Mark, Rob and Jenny, and Sarah are fictional! But their attitudes are common. Mark - worrying about what job to do; Rob and Jenny - not serving in church because they feel they're not needed; and Sarah -struggling with her assurance as a Christian. They would all benefit from understanding more about the 'priesthood of all believers'. This was a radical reformation idea that was articulated by Martin Luther. In Luther's time, the Catholic church was all-powerful, and taught that the priests were a special class of Christian. Only they could do the really 'spiritual' things - give absolution; baptize; lead the Eucharist. Church Ministry was seen superior to 'secular' callings. Life split into sacred and secular; the priests and the 'professional' Christians did spiritual work; Monday-Friday, 9-5 work was 'secular', and spiritually inferior.

But Luther taught that all Christians are equal; that church ministers are not a special class of Christian. All Christians, whatever role they play, were 'priests', so in the church everybody has a part to play. And life wasn't divided into 'sacred' and 'secular'; in Christ - all work, whether preaching or cleaning; teaching or ministering; cooking or housework - were legitimate 'callings'.

There are two questions here:

- i) Access - who gives me access to God? do I need to go through a priest, or special holy person? Do I meet God by going in a church building?
- ii) Vocation- what kind of work is 'spiritual'? Are some Christians more 'holy' than others because of the work they do?

The 'priesthood of all believers' speaks to both of these; to see how we need to turn to 1 Peter.

The main idea of this passage is quite simple - Jesus fulfils two OT roles - the temple and the priest so they are no longer necessary. These also deal with the two aspects - access (the temple), and vocation (the priest).

First, the temple -

i) There are no special buildings: We access God through Christ (4 - 8)

Follow the logic of the passage. As we come to Christ (4), we are built by God into a 'spiritual house' (5) - a temple - a community of people who trust in and follow Christ. This 'temple' is built on Christ as the foundation, or 'cornerstone' (6), and in that temple we are like the bricks - the 'living stones' (5).

The point is that this temple is 'spiritual' - not physical. Built on Christ, not on a physical foundation.

i) There are no special buildings: We access God through Christ (4 - 8)

Now this language has an important history that we need to grasp.

We need to go deeper into three things: the temple, the priest, and the sacrifice.

In the Old Testament, the temple was where God dwelt. Where His presence was; where you could meet Him. God had an address - a postcode. He was contained; he dwelt behind a curtain, in the inner sanctuary, or 'holy of holies'. God's presence had to be contained; you couldn't just stroll in. Why. Because of sin. His people were sinful; and He was holy. You can't get near the sun because it's too hot; try and you will burn up. Same with God. He was too holy. We are sinful; Try and get near Him, and you would die. So, the problem - how can sinful people have access to God?

Enter the priest. The Priest acted as the people's representative. He could have access to God, but only on one day of the year - the Day of Atonement. But remember the problem of sin... even the priest was a sinner. So how could he have access?

Enter the sacrifice. The idea is simple - an animal was killed instead of the people, instead of the priest. The priest had to kill a bull and a goat, and then he could go behind the curtain and have access to God.

Now, the big difference is that Christ fulfils all these practices.

So, working backwards, Christ is the sacrifice. In his death, He was like the goat, the bull - He died, in the place of all of us, all of God's people.

But He also is the priest - the representative of all of God's people. In His death, Jesus stands in for all of us.

And both the sacrifice and the priest are perfect - so, in the OT, where the sacrifices had to be repeated year after year, Jesus' sacrifice is enough, and never has to be repeated. Through Jesus, we have access to the presence of God.

So, you see, in a sense, Jesus is the temple - it is through Him we have access to God. And, in another sense we are the temple - as, in Him, God dwells with us.

And that means that we don't need a physical temple anymore:

i) There are no special buildings: We access God through Christ (4 - 8)

Apply

If God doesn't dwell in buildings, dwells in Christ, then you don't need to come into a church to come close to God. You are no closer to God in here than you are in WHSmiths in the New town; you're no closer to God on a Sunday during communion than you are on Tuesday afternoon at work - you draw near to God anytime, anywhere, through Jesus.

It's not things of church that bring us near to God either - not communion; not music - worship. Easy for people to think that music has the power to bring us into God's presence; but it doesn't; it's only Jesus that can bring us in. Your Quiet time - that in itself cannot bring you into God's presence; it's a useful structure that helps us pray; God is no more 'easily accessible' just because you're having a quiet time.

But access is through Christ...

- have you come to God through Christ? You don't need to go anywhere special - you can come to God today through Him.

- are you enjoying the access you have? You can pray to God anywhere - do you?

- Like Sarah, are you a Christian who struggles with assurance? God feels close some days, but far away on others? The answer isn't to come to church more. Rather, just go to God through Jesus. Draw near Him.

i) There are no special buildings: We access God through Christ (4 - 8)

That's the temple - deals with the question of access; but our passage also speaks of priests, and how Jesus fulfils this. This is the question of vocation.

ii) There are no special people: We are all priests in Christ, (9-11)

OT - priests were a special class of people within Israel; Moses' brother Aaron was the first priest. OT priests had a specific job - they represented God's people to God, sacrificing on their behalf. But underneath the 'special' priests, God's people were also to be 'little' priests - as we saw in Exodus 19, to be a kingdom of priests.

We've seen that that role of 'special' priest is fulfilled by Christ. He is our priest, who has offered the sacrifice once for all. But, under Him, just like Israel, we are all also little priests - a 'kingdom of priests'. Radical - instead of their being one priest, or a special class of priests - we are all priests.

ii) There are no special people: We are all priests in Christ, (9-11)

That is what verses 9 -11 teach.

The question we need to come with to verse 9 is - what does it mean to be in Christ? What has God saved us for? Not just to be individuals: to be:

'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' (9).

These aren't just phrases - again, they have an OT history that we need to grasp. Remember the language in Exodus 19, v.6. Israel was to be:

- a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and holy nation'

Now the question is - what does that mean?

Central is the idea of being 'set apart'. In Exodus 19, God is saying - 'although the whole earth is mine, I have set you apart as a people, to be mine. And so I require of you to set me apart above all else in your lives.' Or, in a word, to be holy.

The same for us - central to the idea of being a priest is holiness - setting God apart above everything else in your life. Letting Him be central you your life, and living accordingly.

This begs the question: what place do good works have, if salvation by faith alone, without works? Works for the Christian are about status, not merit.

When we become Christians, our status changes: through Christ alone we belong to God. And if we belong to God, then simply, we are to live differently: there is behaviour that is appropriate to our new status. *Out of that status*, we are to do good works to please Him. We can't merit any more of God's love by our works; but rather out of our status, we live differently

When Meghan Markle marries Prince Harry next May, her status is going to change. Now, she's not of royal blood, so she won't be 'Princess Meghan', but will be treated as a royal, Princess Harry of Wales. Her marriage changes her status, there's nothing she's done to earn that, once she's married, nothing that she

does can alter that status. Now the point is that as Harry's wife, as 'Princess Harry', there is behaviour that is appropriate - things that she would stop doing; things she would start doing.

For the Christian - it's the same - remember who you belong to - there's behaviour that appropriate.

ii) There are no special people: We are all priests in Christ, (9-11)

Have you set God apart above everything else? Are you living a life that demonstrates to others, to the world, that you belong to God? Or is something else more important to you? Money? Your career? Your children? Your relationships?

And if you belong to God, are you enjoying Him?

Belonging is the language of ownership, or value. We belong to God; are owned by Him, are valuable to Him. And that changes how we see 'holiness'. God loves our efforts to live for Him, brings Him honour. Living for Him is about living for his smile: not your peer's smile; God's smile, not your bosses smile; God's joy, not your boyfriend's joy.

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The reformers took this idea of belonging to God and applied it in two spheres:

I) In our ordinary callings

We 'belong to God' in our regular work - so can serve Him there. Remember Mark wrestling with what to do. One job is not more intrinsically pleasing to God than another: it comes down to gifts. So - what's your calling, your job? Student? Teacher? Engineer? Retired? Housewife? It doesn't matter - that's the sphere where you belong to God - and doing work, as well as you can, for God's smile, is pleasing to Him. If you hate your job, do it for Jesus - get up in the morning 'I'm going in today because of Jesus'. Those things are not less intrinsically 'spiritual' than, say, helping at Bible study, or leading your home group. If your Monday-Friday calling is suffering because of your church activity - it is right to pull back from church activity.

II) In the church

Although we don't need to come to church to be close to God – because if we belong to Jesus God's Spirit lives in us – we should want to come to church and we need to come to church! As God's people we are together the temple of God – and just as you can't make a temple out of a single brick, so we need people to make a church. Coming to church week by week encourages us in our faith, teaches us more about God as we study His word, and refreshes our souls as we sing His praises, but it's not all about us! As living stones of God's temple, members of God's family we each have a responsibility to one another and for one another. And you can't be a blessing and encouragement to me if you are not here.

And I do need you, just as you need me. Some people in God's family have different gifts, but that doesn't mean those people are of greater value or worth to God. There is no special class - me, Dave, we're not closer to God or more spiritual just because we are on the payroll. And since we are all priests we shouldn't be doing all the work - we all have a part to play in serving Him in the church. Come and serve; what's your role? Or are you leaving it up to others? Music, coffee, teaching, looking after children, being hospitable, the sound desk; a good start - join a home group.

1) There are no special buildings: We access God through Christ (4 – 8)

2) There are no special people: We are all priests in Christ, (9-11)

3) There is no special work: all work, both in and outside the church is holy because it is done by God's Holy people and should be done for God's greater glory.

And as we take that on board, the promise in those verses from 1 Peter comes into view: 'As you come to him, you like living stones are being built up.' May God build us all up as we serve him wherever he calls us. Let's pray.