**‘His Story’ 7 – EPHESIANS - WHAT IS THE CHURCH?**

We are in a series of teaching messages which takes a whole book of the Bible and teaches its core essential message – every Sunday a different book! Today's book is Ephesians which answers questions like; Why the Church? What is the Church? Can I just be a follower of Jesus on my own? Why do I need to be part of a cluster of believers?

Ephesus was the major city of Asia (minor), a seaport. In 2018 Judy and walked down the main street of what used to be the city of Ephesus. And what used to be a seaport is now inland by about 10 kms! The harbour has silted up – but what remains is a stunning and highly developed Roman-Greco society. It was to this Church Paul wrote – he is chained to a Roman guard in prison most likely in Rome. He might have looked something like this. There was a new movie out this Easter – “Paul, Apostle of Christ’ I recommend you see it online.

Is the Church the building on the street corner? Is the church a world organisation led by the Pope who wears funny clothes? Is the Church what the TV media project – a place for old women and its leader’s, effeminate men who can’t get employment in the real world!

Or is the Church a slick business operation governed with hierarchical precision? Or is it a stay at home and watch the latest televangelist pry money out of your wallet in return for health, wealth and happiness? What has happened to what we call the Church? The book of Ephesians tells us that the Church is none of these. When Jesus said the words in response to Peter’s declaration – *You are the Christ – the Son of the living God* - I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it! He was thinking of a very different kind of Church.

**The book of Ephesians is in two parts:**

**PART 1 is all about what the Church is. PART 2 is all about what the Church does!**

The first clue is the words Paul uses many times – you are ‘In Christ’ It's like this is an important concept. Let me illustrate this for you by way of a sponge and water (immerse the sponge), Is the sponge in the water – or is the water in the sponge? The answer is BOTH. The most significant thing about the Church is not its buildings, budgets, or programs – but that people are connected to God through Christ. They are immersed in the Spirit. In Christ - I am his and he is mine!!! I am in Him and he is in me!! Even better we are in Him and he is in US!

So what is the Church? Three things – Ephesians says to us.

1. **A Gathered Community *who declare that Jesus is the Risen Christ.***

You are so blessed because ‘IN CHRIST’ you have been v3-8 Chosen – Selected. God has decided you are the one! Destined – Before the foundation of the world! Adopted – Bought into God’s family and heir to its wealth. Forgiven - For your sins and freedom is now yours.

Resurrected - (raised) it’s all come to you – ‘In Christ’….You’ve been showered upon! kindness, wisdom and understanding. You have everything you need inside this gathered community in relation to Jesus the head of the Church. You exist to declare he is alive!

But wait there’s more!! V10 One day all of creation will be bought under the authority of Christ. And we are part of that plan. V14 The sign that God has secured you into his family? The Holy Spirit is the guarantee (the engagement or Signet ring of promise). V20 – 23 We declare not just his life but his intention to rule and reign in this world. That’s what makes us a Church – not building, or denomination, or location, but a relationship with the living God *a gathered people* *empowered by the Holy Spirit*.

We are a people with a story to tell of God’s blessing in our lives! Don’t forget where you came from 2:11-22. The body is the main theme of this book. That you are now the body of Christ and a living example of it. Stay connected to the head which is Christ! Take care of the body – nurture and serve the body. Understand you are only a part of something bigger. No one person brings everything to this. We are gathered for a reason. To tell the story of God’s kindness and goodness and blessing.

1. **A Gifted Community *who carry special abilities to do God’s work in the world***

In Chapter 4:1-16 God gave gifts of people to the church – these people equip you so you can do the ministry of God in the world. This is just one of the many lists of gifts in the Bible….but it reminds us that each of us has something to bring to make the Church strong and vibrant. And the strength and weakness of the church as we gather is directly related to how we'll use the gifts God has given us. When we don’t offer what we have the Church will be weak. We can become deceived by plausible arguments, tossed to and fro.

We become side-tracked onto other things.

The Church had no strategic plan – it was God who had the strategy and that was to empower and gift the people to do the work of ministry. God’s strategy was to share the load of this great mission of the Church around people who would use the abilities God gave them.

Some were Apostles, others Prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, and administrators. And still, other gifts of mercy and care, music, helps, healing and discernment, wisdom, giving and finance. Each did what they had gifting for. That’s God’s strategic plan! So don’t expect the elders to come up with the latest strategic plan. God has already set it in place and here it is.

1. **A Growing Community *that share a common goal and future.***

There is - One body, one Spirit, one Lord, faith and baptism. Who grow up into Christ, the head of the Church. This is what unifies the Church with all its diversity. Last week I spoke from Galatians about how diverse the Church is, that we open our doors to people of every cultural, ethnic, gender and economic strata of life. Now how does God intend to keep unity among such a diverse family? How can we avoid offending and grieving the Spirit by each insisting that others do things our way?

Ephesians tell us the answer and it's found in this powerful illustration. (Knitting). Be knit together in love!

Don’t grieve the Spirit, instead be filled with the Spirit and be led by the Spirit. The picture here is of a healthy body, growing stronger, under the direction of Jesus the head. So the obvious question – are you growing? Is Christ being formed inside you? Are the scriptures having an impact on the inside of you? What are you doing differently now that you were not this time last year? What do you see differently? Can you point to something that has changed inside you?

**PART 2 Chapter 4:17 to the end of the book….. is about what the Church does.**

How do we do Church? *By the things we say and the way we live…..*The second half of the book is devoted to how we live out this community of new life.

There are four areas in which this is worked out:

1. **In the Church** – maintain unity Spirit-filled lives that imitate God.

Use your gifting in its diversity to build up the body of Christ….which you are. Don’t project your gifting onto others, serve God with what you have.

1. **In the world** – we practice purity Spirit-filled living. The word which occurs four times in connection with this is the word ‘walk’. Walking is not as spectacular as running….its a plod sometimes. It’s a discipline.
2. **In the home and work** – love and respect. Spirit guided relationships

Practise sacrificial love towards one another. In marriage, in parental guidance and modelling. In the workplace and in employment.

1. **In the spirit** - spiritual battle – Spirit-empowered strength. Although the application is for us to ‘pick up the weaponry’ provided by God to use against the enemy….the use of it is in a collective, not individual sense.

I think the essential message of Ephesians is this: Don’t give up on the Church…..its God’s strategy! When Jesus rose again one of the appearances he made was to the disciples in that upper room and John tells that on that occasion he breathed on each of them and they received the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us in this letter to Ephesians that this is the key to being the Church. And we come back to the sponge. Being in Christ and having Him live inside you. Soak up Christ into your life; you are in Him and He is in you. Thirst and desire to please Him – In your relationships - In your work and business life - In your home and family - In your area of service or gifting that you carry - and stand strong in this spiritual battle we are all in – together moving forwards. I am in Christ, and he is in me.

**Ephesians 5:18** “By being filled” Don’t dip into these truths – immerse yourself in them…..!!! Being filled, or baptised in the Spirit has been so attacked and denigrated in the Church. There is so much confusion and division on this truth…that today pastors rarely teach on it. But it is essential teaching to embrace and understand. What is the Church?

**A GATHERED, GIFTED AND GROWING COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE, WHO ARE IMMERSED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WHO DECLARE JESUS AS THE RISEN CHRIST AND LIVE OUT THIS TRUTH IN RELATIONSHIPS AND SO DEMONSTRATE HOPE AND HEALING TO A WATCHING WORLD.**