

Talk Number Seven

Christians are God's people waiting for God's new world



When she was Prime Minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher once said: *'There is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families.'* One of the problems we face in the West is that of individualism. Individualism is the attitude that the most important thing is *me*: *my* happiness; *my* fulfilment; *my* dreams! *I* am the centre of *my* world; this is *my* world and *I* am God!

This course claims that this attitude is a significant factor in why the world we live in is not the world we all want! This obsession with self is not just a 'Western' problem, but a human problem. This is sometimes encouraged when people become Christians. The good news of Jesus is reduced to Jesus dying to help *me* become a better person or a happier person.

But when we looked at Abraham, we saw that God's promise was not just to Abraham as a single, solitary individual, but to Abraham as the father of a great nation. God's promise was to make a people who would love and serve him. God's promise was to make a people who would enjoy the kind of world we all want where there is justice, peace, abundance and security.

Jesus died to make that promise come true. He did not die just to rescue *me* - he died to create a new nation. It is a very different nation from any other nation we have ever known. It is a nation made up of people from all other nations, all rescued by Jesus and serving him as their King. God's new nation is not defined by geography, politics, ethnic identity or history. It is defined by God's rescue through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is created by the Holy Spirit as he powerfully and wonderfully takes all that Jesus has done and applies it to our minds and hearts.

We are going to conclude our series by looking at what it means to be part of this new community; this new nation. In the good news of Jesus God is not inviting you to have an exclusive one-to-one with him. He is inviting you to become part of his family.

1. Christians are a proclaiming community

If what Christians believe is right, then something remarkable has happened - something that almost seems too good to be true.

Let us consider just one example. The Bible speaks about Christians being forgiven. Look at Acts 2:38. Forgiveness is a wonderful thing. When you remember all the things you should not have done; and all the things you should have done but did not - all these things can be forgiven. The Bible says that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, all my past is forgiven and forgotten. My record of offences is wiped clean. I can have a new start. This is not because God has turned a blind eye to my sin; it is because he has done something about it. Right at the beginning he said there was a price to pay for our sin and he is the one who has paid it! This is surely news that people want to hear. And that is only part of what God promises to those who trust in Jesus.

Now look at Acts 1:8. The good news of God's new world goes to all nations. We have got something to shout about. We have been forgiven. We are loved beyond our wildest dreams. We have a future that we cannot begin to imagine. And so we want others to know and enjoy these things as well. The good news of Jesus invites you to share in these blessings. It also invites you to join in telling others this good news.

2. Christians are a loving community

No-one likes to be lonely. No one likes to be unloved. It is a terrible feeling to be abandoned. In our last session we saw that Jesus was abandoned in a terrible way on the cross. And he did it for us. Jesus was abandoned so that we need not be. On the day of judgment, God will not abandon those who belong to Jesus. And we can be part of God's new community here and now.

Look at Acts 2:42-47.

1. Christians are committed to one another
2. Christians share together
3. Christians love one another as Jesus has loved us

What this means is that the church is the prototype of the world we all want. Just as Jesus gave us a glimpse of that world in his life and ministry so his people are a foretaste of what is to come. To the extent that Christians submit to the rule of King Jesus, we catch a tantalising glimpse of the world we all want. To the extent that the Holy Spirit rules in our hearts and lives, Christians will be lovers: lovers of God and lovers of others. As a result, the church will be a place of provision, security, acceptance, abundance, joy, peace and rest. An outpost of the world we all want right here in the middle of the world we all know!

3. Christians are a waiting community

Christians would be the first to admit that we are not all we should be and our churches are not all that they should be.

1. We do not love each other as we should.
2. We do not forgive each other as we should.
3. We do not share with each other as we should.

When I was younger, I had a T-shirt with the following inscription. On the front it said: 'Please be patient with me.' On the back were the words: 'God hasn't finished with me yet.' That could be the motto of every Christian and every church. Not to indulge us in our failings, but to give us hope in the midst of them! These failures make us long for Jesus to return to bring in the world we all want.

Look at Acts 1:11. Jesus will come back to establish God's new world. We look forward to that together. The Bible ends with these words: 'He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon!" Amen! Come, Lord Jesus.' (Revelation 22:20)

But there is a disturbing alternative. Look at Acts 2:40. God's people will enjoy God's new world. But those who are not God's people will be excluded. They will be judged by God and punished for ever.

It is perhaps an appropriate place to pause and to think about this issue of judgement. To many of us, the idea of a God who judges and punishes is offensive. But we have seen on many occasions that the Bible story shows him to be precisely that kind of God. And is it altogether so unreasonable? We all want justice when we think we are

victims. We all want justice when we see people committing serious sins like murder or abuse. So the problem is not with judgement *per se* but how we see our rejection of God and our offences against him. In short, we see those things as insignificant; God sees them as monumental. Murder or gossiping are both offensive to him because they both express a heart that is full of self and deficient in love towards God and others.

The duration of the sentence is also something many people react against. They see it as a medieval and crude concept, with images shaped more by Dante's *Inferno* than the Bible. But Hell is a choice. Hell is God giving people what they want. Those in hell are those who have rejected God and told him they want nothing to do with him. Hell is nothing more than God granting them their most basic desire.

4. We become God's people through baptism and repentance

Look at Acts 2:38. Repentance is recognising our part in spoiling this world. It means accepting God's new world with God in control.

Baptism is the way we express our trust in God and our membership of his people. It is a picture of being washed clean and a picture of being born again. When we go into the water we die to our old way of life. We give up our membership of the community that rejects God. We become members of the community that loves God and serves Jesus. We become part of a new creation.

We must accept God's new world on *his* terms. We need to let God be in charge of our lives. We need to trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus. We need to acknowledge that Jesus is our only hope.

Conclusion

The big question is: Is God's new world the world we all want? Is it the world you want? Do you want a world in which God is in control?

We began by describing the world we all want. It was a place with sunshine, food and shelter. It is a world with justice, peace and friendship. We all agreed on these things and we all recognised that this world is not like that. The Bible has shown us that I am the problem. The world is spoiled because we have turned our back on God.

The world we all want is a world promised by God. We have seen as we have made our way through the Bible story that God is, among many other things, someone who keeps his promises. Which means that the world we want will come. But we will only enjoy it if we turn back to God; if we apologise to him; and if we put our trust in Jesus Christ. We will then live under his rule as his people. We will begin to enjoy God's new world now and we will look forward to the time when it comes in full. The choice is yours.

I want to appeal to you, as Peter did to that crowd in Acts 2: 'Save yourself'. If you continue to live without Christ, you are already living under judgment. You will face the final, irreversible judgment of God and that is a truly terrible thing.

If you truly want God's new world, turn to Jesus in repentance and faith. Show it in baptism as you become part of his family. Begin to experience something of that world we all want and together we can look forward to the day when it comes in all its wonderful glory.