

“Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house”, a sermon preached by Jordan Redding at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 7 October 2018.

Recently I’ve had the opportunity to go on a research trip overseas. It was a productive and rewarding time, but living out of a suitcase can get quite tiresome. No matter how much you try and arrange things to feel like home, it’s impossible to shake a feeling that you’re not home. Somehow you don’t belong.

By the end of the six weeks, I was very eager to come home — to New Zealand, to Dunedin, to Knox Church, to my family. I feel I belong in these places. I feel at home. I’m very grateful to have a place to call home. I can’t imagine what it would be like to live out of a suitcase without a homecoming at the end of it. I can’t imagine what it would be like to live in a place where I am not part of the majority culture, or do not speak the majority language, or do not instinctively know the little social conventions when you interact with someone in the supermarket, or on the street, or in a cafe. Perhaps that’s why it’s so easy to become desensitised to the dozens of stories we hear about this refugee crisis, or stories about other people who for whatever reason “do not belong.” It’s just so far away from my own reality.

During my ministry training in Christchurch, I conducted occasional services at a small country church. A beautiful wee church — both the building and the people. A church that comfortably sits about 30-40 people, so small that it just bounced on top of its foundations during the earthquakes. Most of the congregants sitting in the pews on a Sunday had sat in those exact pews their whole lives, and before that their parents, and before that their grandparents. Eventually you graduated from the pew to the little graveyard that surrounded the church. As I preached there, I could literally see the graves of the parents and grandparents and great-grandparents who had shaped this place and this people. Those who had passed away still had a very real living presence in the place. For those who belonged, it was an incredibly special place. But for newcomers — and by newcomers, I mean anyone who didn’t have a previous generation buried in the graveyard — you felt

like somehow you weren't part of the place. You were welcome, but it wasn't *your* place.

I'm sure many churches are like this. And not just churches. But in many areas of our lives we surround ourselves with people who similar to us. Clubs. Political parties. Socio-economic classes. Right through to whole societies and cultures. Human beings have a tendency to organise their life around people who are like them. Who share a similar story. Who speak the same language. Who dress the same and behave the same. It makes us feel safe, like we belong, like we have a home. Which is certainly not all bad — to have a safe space, a place to call home. It seems to be something we instinctively yearn for and, when we have it, something we anxiously defend. The problem is that by implication there's always an outsider, those who don't have the same story, or speak the same language, or dress, behave and think the same. People, whom we perceive to threaten our way of life, our home. We see the worst effects of this all over the world today.

So on this World Communion Sunday, the question I have is what makes the Church fundamentally different from any other group of like-minded people, shaped by similar stories and ways of behaving? The Church is *by and large* well-intentioned, and *by and large* does good things — but it's still shaped by practices and ways of life that to the outsider would seem quite foreign. We profess to be a community where all are welcome, where all belong, but on what grounds do we say that?

Today we heard a section of Peter's first letter to the early Church. In a certain sense, I feel like his letter wasn't meant for me. He was writing to people who didn't belong: to numerous early Christian communities scattered throughout what is now modern Turkey. In places where they were a small minority of the population. The Christians he wrote to were treated as aliens, foreigners, second class citizens. Whether they had lived there a long time or not, their faith earmarked them as outsiders, who didn't belong. They were persecuted — but not necessarily a kind of state-sanctioned persecution. No, they were likely persecuted primarily by ordinary folk, people like you and me, who didn't trust the person different to them — who worshipped that strange God, Jesus Christ.

To these early Christian communities, who were very much outsiders, Peter sought to give them a new foundation for community and belonging. The passage we heard today is packed full of Old Testament imagery, much of it from the prophet Isaiah, who was also writing to a people in exile, to a people dispersed in a foreign land. And Peter used imagery of the Temple in Jerusalem. He talks about the early Church as a holy nation, a royal priesthood. He talks about them being built into a spiritual house, a dwelling place of God — for the early Christians, many of whom were Jews, they would have instantly thought of the Temple in Jerusalem.

For the people of Israel, the Temple in Jerusalem was the dwelling place of God, the intersection point where heaven and earth meet. Through the ritual sacrifices, the people were restored into right relationship with God, with one another, and the land beneath them, which was a gift from God. Through the feast and celebrations they remembered God's liberating work in their history, they shared in the abundance of God's provision, and they were directed forward in hope to the coming Messiah and the day of Atonement. The Temple was a kind of microcosm, a foretaste of the world as it was intended to be. It was not an exclusive place, but rather an intersection point, like a pebble in a pond, where the witness of God's faithfulness in the world was proclaimed and shared in.

Similar ideas have profoundly influenced Church architecture over the years. Murray Rae, a Professor of Theology at the University, recently published a book on the changing form of church architecture in New Zealand. One of the most popular forms of the 19th and 20th centuries was the "temple model". If you want a classic example of the "temple model", he says, look no further than Knox Church. Knox was meant to reflect something of the Temple in Jerusalem: the high lofty roof and refracted light from stained glass windows to give a sense of transcendence — we are coming into God's presence; a meeting of heaven and earth; the steps up to the narrow front entrance, through which people funnel in — it's not supposed to be easy to come here, but rather you are to come with a sense of reverence; the long aisle which leads to the sanctuary, the "Holy of Holies" so to speak, with the choir separating the people from the front.

But for our Reformed mothers and fathers in the faith, the focus was always ... the table. This intersection point of heaven and earth, this dwelling place of God, is no longer a building, or a particular place, but a meal, and a people who gather around the meal, with Christ himself as the host.

For Peter, I think, this is central to what makes the Church the Church, what it makes it different from any other community or group. Here, the host of the meal, is the rejected one, the suffering one, the crucified one. Here, Christ is the cornerstone by which all the other misfits and outsiders find their place. But Peter is also clear that this same Christ, because he is rejected, is a stumbling block for those who are in control and the centre of things. The Church is a fundamentally different place, because those who belong don't belong by virtue of what they believe, or how they behave, or what they look like, but by God's invitation to us in Jesus Christ.

For those of us that are lucky enough to have a home, or a beautiful building in which to gather, it doesn't mean these things are bad. But it does mean that by coming to this meal we do not belong first and foremost to Knox Church, or Dunedin, or New Zealand ... we belong to Christ and in him to one another that we might be built as a spiritual house, and a dwelling place of God in the world. We don't need to defend this home because it's not *ours* to defend. We are here solely by grace. It's not defined by same ways of behaving or believing. It's not based on a shared moral code or set of doctrines. No, this place has as its centre the very life of God, given in Jesus Christ by the Spirit.

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