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In these turbulent days Christ's followers can be encouraged over the Church's health and growth in some parts of the world, but the news is less good elsewhere, notably in the so-called "Christian West". So how are things going in Christ's worldwide Church? Indeed, what IS "the Church"? Who and what is it for, and where is it going, if anywhere?! As we consider these basic questions over the next few Weekly Reflections God willing, it helps to start way back, for in terms of the biblical timescale the Church is a latecomer on to the scene.

Within the Book of Genesis, four foundational spiritual principles are established. First, since the Fall of Genesis 3, there has been at the heart of all God-Man dealings one great problem: how can the perfect God our Creator ever be in fellowship with a now-fallen, sinful, imperfect human race, incapable, from our side, of our ever being good enough to approach Him in all His holiness?

Second, God made His Messianic Promise – that in His good time the "seed of the woman" would crush the serpent's head, destroy his God-defying works, and thus open the way back into fellowship with God.

Third, we read in Genesis 12 how God chose Abram and his barren wife Sarai, promising to form through them "a great nation" (v 2), a nation that would become the crucial go-between between Almighty God and His fallen creation. The Hebrews duly became God's covenant people, the "children of Israel", and later "the Jews" (through the line of Judah) to whom were granted great privileges – such as the indwelling presence of God, the Law, the tabernacle and its offerings, the Promised Land and the temple – and hence great responsibilities too.

Fourth, tucked away in Genesis 15.6 we read the precious words – "And he (Abram) believed in the Lord; and he (the Lord) counted it to him for righteousness". Therein lies the secret to "the way back" for any of us: our simple belief that God's words are true (see also Habakkuk 2.4b / Romans 4.3,9 / Galatians 3.6 / James 2.23).

The Jews, "the apple of His eye" (eg., Deuteronomy 32.10 / Psalm 17.8 and others), a people holy, set apart and different, were to be a visual-aid for other nations. The Law set out God's standards, but also quickly proved that no-one could possibly meet those standards by human effort. So the gulf remained between Creator and created. The sacrificial offerings in the tabernacle and temple gave the same message, that human goodness will never be enough.

But that sacrificial shedding of animals' blood always pointed forward to God's one, ultimate sacrifice - the shedding of the innocent blood of His only Son, the

“seed of the woman”, the true Lamb of God who “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1.29).

The Messiah was born, truly “Immanuel, God with us”. All was set fair for the establishment of Christ’s kingdom, but the response of the Jewish authorities was, “No! Away with Him! Crucify! His blood be upon us and upon our children We have no king but Caesar” (Matthew 27.22,25 / John 19.15).

It is no wonder that at this point God the Father removed His covenant people from the “natural olive tree” (see Romans 11), for the time being (eg., Romans 11.25 / Luke 21.24), and 37 years later the Jews were swept away from their land to become homeless wanderers for nearly 1900 years.

In their place came the Church – wholly new, never revealed to the Old Testament prophets, “a mystery”, (that is, a total surprise, eg., Ephesians 3.1-6), and hence a nasty shock for Jesus’ Jewish followers! For now Jews and the Gentiles they had so long despised were in fellowship with one another and with the Lord God their Father, all based on their common faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (eg., Galatians 3.22-29 / Ephesians 2 / Romans 5.1-2).

It is this new thing, “the Church”, consisting of believers in Christ, which is entrusted with proclaiming the beautiful Good News of salvation, by faith alone, in Christ alone. The Christian Church has replaced the Jews for the present as God’s “visual aid”, proclaiming, and illustrating, that the old problem of the God-Man gulf, insoluble from Man’s side, has been wonderfully solved from God’s side by the Person and Work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the best thing anyone can do in this life is to put their “faith-eggs” into the “Christ basket” (John 3.1-21), and then, as a member of Christ’s Church, to assist others to do the same (eg., Philippians 2.1-16).

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