

What is the DNA of our church?

Reading: 1 Peter 1: 3-9

This morning I want to ask a question of fundamental importance as in these days we as a church consider our future alignment. What is, or should be, the DNA of our church? When we unpeel all of our activities and ministries, our day-to-day involvement in a multitude of meetings and tasks, at heart what is it that we exist for, that makes us what we are? I want to propose an answer to this question. What is the DNA of our church? – it is Jesus, 100%.

This is the theme of Peter’s first letter, a letter written to Christians scattered here, there and everywhere by the relentless opposition of state and society, living as exiles wherever they could find a place of respite. There are three things which should define us as a people:

We should receive all that Jesus offers us (1 Peter 1: 9)

We should allow Jesus to change us (1 Peter 1: 15)

We should follow Jesus wherever he leads us (1 Peter 2: 21)

We should receive all that Jesus offers us. We do not primarily come offering ourselves to God, as if we have qualities and attributes that would help Him establish His kingdom, generously making our contribution available for Him to use. Firstly and primarily we come to receive from Jesus. As the words of Augustus Toplady in the hymn “Rock of Ages” so powerfully put it:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, look to Thee for dress,
Helpless look to Thee for grace:
Foul, I to the fountain fly,
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.*

We should allow Jesus to change us. Our Lord was the one who himself said, “*I have not come to get the righteous to follow me. I have come to get sinners to turn away from their sins.*” (Luke 5: 32). The use of the word ‘sin’ is increasingly frowned upon in our society, which is actually rather strange because people are nonetheless increasingly vociferous and judgemental in expressing disapproval of the values and actions of others they disagree with, and all are aware of acts of unspeakable evil that are perpetrated daily throughout the world. Sin clearly exists and causes havoc in human relationships. Perhaps the problem people have today is accepting the verdict of the Bible that **all** of us are sinners (Rom 3: 23). It is, or should be, part of our DNA that we invite and allow Jesus to change us into those who increasingly reflect his character.

We should follow Jesus wherever he leads us. In our interactions in society, our involvement in the community, our submission to authority, our reaching out to the needy, in all of these things we follow the leading and guiding of our head, who is Jesus. There are others who might seek to steer us, indeed the Bible itself tells us to submit to and obey our human leaders (Heb 13: 17), but only in so far as they direct us to follow Jesus as supreme head. Time and again the Bible warns God’s people to watch out for those who will use leadership positions to take the church in the wrong direction (e.g. Acts 20: 28-31).

This morning I want to focus on the first of these three principles: we should receive all that Jesus offers us, looking particularly at the verses from first Peter that were in our Bible reading earlier.

The first thing that Peter says God offers us through Jesus is new birth – ‘new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.’ (1 Pet 1: 3).

Jesus said to the Jewish theologian and rabbi Nicodemus, “no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (John 3: 3). God’s kingdom is the enduring reality; this earth on which we live is transient and passing away. We can focus all of our ambition, all of our aspirations, all our energy on building our kingdom on this earth, but all will be for nothing in the final analysis, for we and this whole earth which we inhabit, sooner or later are passing away like smoke in the wind. What is real and substantial and enduring is God’s kingdom, and Jesus offers us the opportunity to be citizens of this kingdom. The only citizens in God’s kingdom are those born into it, those who have God’s seed within them, those whom He calls His children. And John wrote down this wonderful and yet challenging truth: “He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” (John 1: 11-13). This, then, is essentially what a church is. It is not a building, nor is it an institution or organisation; it is not a club, nor is it a charitable body. A church is simply a gathering of God’s children, those who each have the right to say, “I am a child of God,” those who by their faith in Jesus have secured the right to be citizens of His kingdom.

John wrote of what he had seen, that many decided not to receive Jesus, but some, perhaps the few, did receive him, and received in him the wonderful gift of new birth as children of God. I said this truth is challenging. The challenge, surely, is this. You may see yourself as belonging to this church. You may have been attending for years, or on the other hand have only been coming for a couple of weeks. But the essential question is, are you a child of God, are you a member of His family, a citizen of His kingdom? If not then there is no better time than now to reach out to Jesus and receive the gift that he holds out to you.

The second thing that Peter says God offers us through Jesus is an inheritance – ‘an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.’ (1 Pet 1: 4).

An inheritance is not earned. It is not payment for faithful service. It is not a reward for doing well. It is not something you deserve or merit. It comes freely from parent to child, as a birth-right. Peter says this inheritance is kept in heaven for God’s children. It is the anticipation of this inheritance that Peter uses as an encouragement to his readers. They needed encouragement. They had been persecuted and abused for their faith, scattered and exiled for their faith, sometimes living in crypts and catacombs for safety. Their experience, and that of others today, is a lesson to us. If we depend on what the world has to offer for our comfort and peace then there will come a time, sooner or later, when we will be completely let down. John told us that the world is passing away, including all the desires it offers (1 John 2: 17). Our inheritance in heaven, however, can never perish, spoil or fade (1 Pet 1: 4).

Nevertheless our inheritance is not merely a promise of future blessing – as some put it “pie in the sky when you die.” When writing to the church at Ephesus Paul said, “When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (Eph 1: 13-14). God provides us with a down-payment of our inheritance when we put our faith in Jesus – His Holy Spirit to dwell in us and to walk with us. He is our guide, our comfort, our encouragement, our wisdom, our strength, our healing, our peace, our joy, our love. Paul also said to the Ephesian Christians, “Be filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5: 18). So here is another question: are you filled with God’s Holy Spirit today? This is part of the DNA of all of God’s children, and every true church of Jesus Christ. There is nothing you need to do to earn this wonderful privilege. If you believe in Jesus and are a child of God then the Holy Spirit’s indwelling is part of your birth-right. If you have never thanked God before for His gracious gift then be sure to take time in this hour to express your thankfulness and ask the Holy Spirit to minister to you, to strengthen you, encourage you and equip you for God’s service.

The third thing that Peter says God offers us through Jesus is protection – ‘shielded by God’s power.’ (1 Pet 1: 5).

God protects His children. He jealously guards them; no-one can pluck them from His hand. This is not to say that He removes all difficulties from our path. On the contrary, Peter says that God allows difficulties and trials of every kind that cause us grief. But only for good reason, and only to ensure the strengthening of our faith and our eventual receiving of all the blessings that He has prepared for us. Our problem is that so often we doubt this. We worry and fear. We experience trials and are tempted to think that God is not there and our prayers are unheard. When God tells us to take a step of obedience we hesitate and hold back, afraid lest the cost will be too great and God will not provide for us. What did Jesus say? – “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt 14: 31). The power of God protecting and providing is part of the DNA of all of God’s children.

The fourth thing that Peter says God offers us through Jesus is joy – ‘an inexpressible and glorious joy.’ (1 Pet 1: 8).

Nehemiah said to the people when they were in great distress over their failure to obey God’s word, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8: 10). Oftentimes we only quote the last part of this verse. But God didn’t provide joy only for times we are happy. He provides joy for the times when grief overwhelms us, when troubles seem too great to bear, when burdens are heavy. Nehemiah made the people eat and drink and celebrate. Inexpressible and glorious joy is part of the DNA of every child of God and every church made up of God’s children. That is why we sing songs of praise to Him even when we don’t feel like it. Very often it is when we take the step of faith to express our joy that joy is released within us.

The fifth thing that Peter says God offers us through Jesus is salvation – ‘you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.’ (1 Pet 1: 9).

This may appear strange at first. Surely we are saved when we become a child of God, when we put our faith in Christ, our sins are forgiven, and God’s Holy Spirit comes to empower us to turn away from all that hinders our walk with God. Yes we are, but the Bible tells us that our salvation commences at that point but continues until the day that we are called to be with Christ in glory. When we go to be with Him we will be finally set free from all that entices us into sin, all that hinders our service for Him, our weaknesses, our frailty, the ever-increasing restrictions of our aging bodies, the opposition of Satan, the prison of the grave itself. He is going to save us from it all. This is our DNA – a people who are receiving salvation by the precious blood of Christ and the power of His glorious resurrection.