

Introduction

- "Are you going through to the rain shelter?", my sister asked one of her friends
 - I was extremely puzzled!
 - because it was a Sunday morning, and we were in a church hall just after the service, having coffee!
 - this was at the church she worshipped at while she was in London
- "Are you going through to the rain shelter?"
 - what was she on about?!
- It turned out that this was a phrase that some members of that congregation used to refer to the part of the building where Sunday services normally took place!
 - they didn't call it "the church"
 - they didn't call it "the sanctuary"
 - because they wanted to emphasise, to themselves as much as anything, that "church" wasn't the building
 - the building was just a place to be out of the rain while they were worshipping; it was little more than a rain shelter
- Exaggerated way of doing it, perhaps, but true!
- So, what is "church"?
 - that's essentially the question Peter was grappling with as he wrote to a church...
 - he's asking, "do you people know who you are? do you know why you're here? do you know what you're about?"
- Writing to churches living in a society whose governing authorities were hostile to them (1:6-7)
 - "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials." (1:6)
 - can't tell to what extent official hostility and persecution were reflected in society at large
 - but people are prone to align with persecutors rather than the persecuted.
- It is remarkable, therefore, that Peter encourages the Christians not to cut themselves off from their society but to have a very positive attitude towards it.
 - any hindrance to involvement did not come from the church but from society
- Generally speaking today, particularly in the UK, the church is not officially excluded from society at large:
 - school chaplaincy, bishops in the Lords, church voice often heard (if ignored) on moral & ethical issues
 - though often sidelined in reality
 - we have, however, no excuse whatsoever not to be involved!
- The thrust of the passage is that the church does not exist for itself but for those who do not belong to it
 - look at v.9: "that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"
- Well-known statement:
 - not sure if its utterly true... cancer charities? etc
 - "The church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of non-members"

Temple

- Peter uses 3 pictures of the church which make it quite clear that the social sins Peter talked about in 2:1-3 can have no place in it and that it exists to serve others:
 - (a) a temple or holy building
 - (b) an order of priests
 - (c) a holy nation, a people belonging to God
- It is a temple that is held together by the chief cornerstone who is Jesus.

1 Peter 2:1-12 Living Stone and Living Stones Fintry, 27/8/2006, am

- Jesus is the foundation of the building
- he is the one who keeps the building together
- without him there would be no temple
- The point that is being made is that when we become Christians we are joined together with others who trust in Jesus for their salvation to form a new community whose life is sustained by Jesus.
 - from what we know of Jesus it is inconceivable that nasty things like malice, deceit, etc. should be allowed to flourish in such a community
- But a temple does not exist just for itself
 - it is a place where people can come to meet with God
 - so the church should be a community where people can come to meet with God
 - not a place where people can be dragged so that they can hear a message of how to draw near to God!
- The church is not a place, but a community in which God dwells by his Spirit
 - it is coming into the community that brings people near to God, as much as hearing about the secret of people's love
- Again, the phrase 'coming into the community' can give the wrong impression because it suggests that the initiative to make contact with the church lies with the outsider
 - the opposite should be true!
 - the community of the church reaches out to the outsider

Priests

- The task of the order of priests which Peter knew best was to be go-betweens between God and the people of Israel
 - they kept the temple going in Jerusalem
 - they took the sacrifices from the people and presented them on the altar to God on their behalf
 - they took the tithes from the people and gave them to the poor
- Now that system of the temple in one place and an elite priesthood has been superseded by Jesus Christ
 - he is now the temple and all who trust in him are priests with the responsibility to offer 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God' (v.5)
- Very simply, spiritual sacrifices are made when we offer our time, energy, abilities and possessions to bless God and to bless our neighbour:
 - and in particular our neighbour who is poor, physically or spiritually, inside and outside the church

Nation

- The key idea here is one of separation
 - as Christians we are to be a distinguishable community because of our devotion to God
 - we are set apart, i.e. holy, for him
 - it is our love for God in Jesus that distinguishes us
 - that is what makes us a people
- In the Old Testament what made Israel distinguishable was the fact that they had been saved by God from slavery in Egypt and had been given a divine law by which to live
 - similarly, we are distinguishable because we have been saved from our sin through Jesus and have been given the perfect law of freedom by which to live
- But God did not call Israel just for his own or for their sake but for the sake of all nations
 - Israel was meant to be a light for the Gentiles
 - in the New Testament the church takes over this function
 - the church exists to show God's glory to the world
 - the only way we can do this effectively is by the quality of our communal life and service

Conclusion

- The two main points of **separation from what is evil** in the world and **involvement with those outside** in all their needs are underlined in these verses
 - we are to be **'aliens and strangers in the world'** who **'live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God'**
- **Not the building that does the witnessing:**
 - I fear we are in danger of slipping into that, as we thank God - rightly - for the building and its location
 - so much that we think we are being a witness simply by maintaining a building here that people look at, and maybe read the poster by the front gate...
 - those are good things - but they don't constitute us living as **'aliens and strangers in the world'** who **'live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God'**
- **We are to be a people, built together**
 - such a tangible unity
 - not because we don't fall out with each other - though that's a good start!
 - but because we share a common purpose, we are bound together by our common allegiance to Christ and to declaring the good news of his salvation!
- **We are the church!**