

Sermon for Multicultural Service 30 Oct 2005  
By Geoff Wraight

## **Being at Home in God**

Genesis 2:4-9, Leviticus 19:33-34, Matthew 25:31-40

What does it mean to be at home?

What does it mean to belong?

What does it mean to be in a familiar place and to be known?

These are basic human needs that all of us know and need.

I think most of you would agree that a home is much more than just a roof and walls or a certain space we occupy - but at the same time it is these things as well. In fact, it is something very crucial to being human yet very hard to describe in another sense.

Sociologist Alfred Schutz had a go back in the 70's and described it this way,

The home is the starting-point and terminus. It is the null-point of the system of co-ordinates which we ascribe to the world in order to find our bearing in it. Geographically 'home' means a certain spot on the surface of the earth. Where I happen to be is my 'abode'; where I intend to stay is my 'residence'; where I come from and whither I want to return is my 'home'. Yet home is not merely the homestead - my house, my room, my garden, my town - but everything it stands for. The symbolic character of the notion 'home' is emotionally evocative and hard to describe... It means, of course, father-house and mother-tongue, the family, the sweetheart, the friends; it means a beloved landscape, 'songs my mother taught me', food prepared in a particular way, familiar things of daily use, folk ways, and personal habits - briefly, a peculiar way of life composed of small and important elements.

Being human means more than just occupying a certain amount of physical room... Human space is personal space, social space and spiritual space. And it is more than just space is it place.

A personal place - being at home with ourselves.

A social place - a family, neighbourhood, community and city.

A spiritual place - a deeper sense of meaning and connection - a place occupied by the sacred..

As we think about the meaning of belonging in a multicultural community of faith such as ours, the question of home becomes a question of who God is.

What sort of community is God calling us to be and how can we develop a deep sense of belonging even in the midst of such diverse backgrounds, cultures and languages.

I think the key is our common calling to belong to the community of the living God of Jesus Christ. The creator God who by very nature is a God of community and belonging.

The three passages of scripture we have read this morning give us some clues about what makes this community special and how we can share a common sense of belonging.

**We can be at home together in God because:**

## **We worship the Creator of all things.**

The thing to notice about the Genesis story of creation is the fact that we are all made of the same stuff. We are all part of the stuff of creation and the creation is part of us. The idea of the interconnected web of life that encompasses the whole globe is right there in Genesis. God is the original environmentalist. Between 1.4 and 1.8 million species (distinct types) of living organisms have so far been named. But some scientists believe that this may be as little as 10 per cent of the total number of species in the world. We learn that the very essence of the whole creation is an incredible diversity of life and elements all connected together. Community in diversity is the very essence of the creation and the signature of the Creator.

But we also learn these things: the world is God's gift, given to us all; God loves each human being who is ever to come into the world; therefore all human beings matter. We are all made in God's image. So, when another human being is exiled or abused, God's image is not treated with due respect. We dishonour the right of that person to belong.

Thus at the most fundamental level we can be at home in God because we are all part of the one creation filled with the life of God.

## **We can be at home together in God because:**

### **God calls us to be a home for the homeless.**

Because God loves of each of us personally, what we share as human beings is much more important than our differences. The communities to which we belong - our families, towns, states and nations - help shape who we are. But we also have responsibility to strangers who do not belong to those communities. When someone who is starving or at risk of their life knocks on the door of our family house or of our nation, we may not simply ignore their plight. They may not belong to our family or our nation, but they are our fellow human beings also loved by God.

We find this insight enshrined in the laws given to the people of Israel. They are instructed to welcome strangers. For God had been with them when they wandered as strangers through Canaan. Because God had chosen them as friends, they were to befriend other strangers who were also God's friends.

The words in Leviticus are unequivocal,

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

And the amazing thing is this. The more they welcomed strangers, the more they fulfilled the purpose God had called them together for, and the more their identity was strengthened, the more their own sense of belonging deepened.

## **We can be at home together in God because:**

### **We will meet Christ in the face of the stranger.**

In his teaching, Jesus also insisted on hospitality to strangers. He shocked the Pharisees by welcoming people whom they excluded from their meals: Romans, tax collectors and prostitutes. He also saw the heart of Israel to lie in the great exhortation to love God with our whole heart, whole mind and whole soul, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. But when Jesus was asked who is our neighbour, he told a story about a Samaritan, a member of a despised group. In his story the Samaritan was the one who showed neighbourly love.

Jesus also died as a stranger to reconcile strangers. He was taken outside the city to be killed, and his brutal killing

was designed to strip him of his humanity. His death shows what sin is like. In it we take our eyes off God and our common humanity, and concentrate on our own interests and those of our group. As Caiphas said of Jesus, it was convenient to kill one man for the sake of the nation. This self-centredness is the attitude that makes refugees and pushes them away from our homes and nation.

When he rose from the dead, Jesus proved that God's love is stronger than our self-centredness. He also gave us hope that our world could be different. Instead of pushing away and punishing the stranger, we can imagine a world in which the differences between people are a source of life and where we share our resources with those most in need. This is a world in which refugees are not made, and when they come they are made welcome. The church, where Paul says there is to be no difference made between Jew and Greek, between men and women is called to be the kind of community we would like to find made between nations. It is one where asylum seekers and refugees should find a welcome.

So in Christian faith, refugees and asylum seekers are important because in them we welcome Christ who comes to us in the stranger. We live out our faith in our face to face meeting with asylum seekers. Nothing is more encouraging than to meet someone who will walk with you and look you in the eye.

In welcoming strangers we welcome Christ and we are at home because our home is open.

### **Conclusion.**

At Westgate Baptist Community we have the wonderful privilege of sharing the same physical space with friends from very different parts of the world. We have become a welcoming place for refugees and we celebrate the diversity of culture and experience they bring to us.

My prayer is that not only will we share the physical space but the same **heart space**, the same **spiritual space** and in doing so become a home in God in the deepest sense.

Amen

Aflred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, vol. II, Nijhoff, 1970 -1973

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