



## The Household of God

An address for the Agape ● 10<sup>th</sup> August 2008 ● Rev Heather

On Founders Day last week, Rev Antoinette led us in a toast to the “Household of God”. Those words are the theme of our agape this morning. We find a reference to them in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians.

*So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.*

*Ephesians 2:19-22*

### The House of God

Perhaps it is not so usual these days, but it used to be common to speak about a church building or a temple as “the house of God”, a place where you could experience the presence of God. This is an idea that is found in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament, we find this replaced by the term “the household of God.” The emphasis moves from a building to people as the dwelling place of God.

We can trace this change in John’s gospel. For the Jews, as for other ancient peoples, the temple was the centre of the world, the connection between the heavens and earth. It was the place on earth where God dwelt. It was actually his house.

The temple in Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish life, and the Holy of Holies the most sacred place on earth. The ark of the covenant, kept within the Holy of Holies, was the visible sign that God dwelt in the midst of his people.

### Christ as the dwelling place of God

This was how the temple was regarded when Christ entered into this world. And with his coming, this idea of the temple was turned upside down.

John’s gospel tells how Christ, at the beginning of his ministry, literally overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, and drove out the sheep and oxen. When he was asked what sign he had to show for such an action, he said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” They thought he was talking about a building - God’s house - but he was speaking of his body as the temple, or dwelling place, of God.

Something new had entered into the relationship between God and human beings. God was no longer contained in sacred buildings, but now dwelt within a human being. To be in the presence of Christ and to experience his being was to be in the presence of God. This was the experience of the disciples. They saw the glory of God in the face of Christ.

## From Christ to Disciples

That was a huge change in consciousness – to understand that God had made his home within a human being. But for the disciples, another huge shift had to come about in their understanding. And this, too, is presented to us in John's gospel, particularly in chapters 14, 15 and 16. These mystical teachings took place when Christ met with his disciples in the upper room just prior to his death. He spoke with them about how they would experience his presence, and therefore the presence of God, in the future.

*I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*  
John 15: 5

The new revelation he opened to them was that God dwelt in the disciples and they dwelt in God. They would experience the presence of God, not in a physical building, not even in Christ whom they would no longer see in the flesh, but within their own being.

The presence of God, which was first known in the temple, then revealed in Jesus Christ, now indwelt his followers. This was both an inner individual experience and an experience of the community. God dwelt in them individually and within their group. As Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst."

In the story of the cleansing of the temple, the word that is used for house is *oikos*, which means a building. Later on in the gospel, in John 14:2, for instance, the word for house is *oikia*. This can mean a building, but it can also refer to a "household", which is about people in relationship rather than a building. Some biblical students think that "the household of God" was a way the Johannine community spoke of themselves. And what a picture that is to have of ourselves and of our community.

## The Household of God

When we think of a household, we tend to think of parents and children. If people ask, "Do you have a family?" they usually mean, "Do you have children?" But it's a silly question, really. For all of us have a family.

It isn't so long ago that the idea of family was much broader than today's picture of a family. It included all your living relatives, your ancestors, in-laws, third cousins twice removed, and even people who had no blood relationship with you.

When I was growing up, I had an Auntie Dolly and Uncle Stan who were not related to us in any way. They lived next door to us, and we often had Christmas dinner with them. And they were just as much my aunt and uncle as those who were related to me – more so, really, because I rarely saw my relatives.

This broad idea of family that is not limited by blood relationship is much closer to what the Bible means by the term "household". The family members, the employees, and the slaves all lived together in the same house, which was both a home and a place where business might be carried out. The head of the household was responsible for the wellbeing of everyone in it, including the slaves, who were entitled to bed and food in return for their service. When the head of the household cared about those within his domain and provided for them, the household worked harmoniously.

In English programs like "Upstairs, downstairs" and others like it, we see this sense of mutual responsibility being played out. The tweeny and the gardener belonged to the household just as much as the members of the family and they had both rights and responsibilities.

The household of God is something like this. Its head is God who works for good in everything that touches us. We who are part of the household have differing tasks and roles and as we carry these out we contribute to the harmony of the whole, to the carrying forward of the work of God, which is the purpose of the household.

### **Within the Household**

What company we are in in this household! It reaches into the heavens and into the earth. God is its head. There are the many beings of the spiritual hierarchy – cherubim, seraphim, thrones, dominions and all the other ranks. Then there are those human beings who have lived on this earth and attained spiritual maturity and are now entrusted with great tasks in the spiritual worlds. Paul speaks of the saints, the initiates, prophets and apostles as the foundation of this household.

To help us understand this, Paul uses the picture of the temple - not as a physical object but as a metaphor for the household. The temple is not one built of stone. It is a living, breathing entity which is continuing to grow. All parts are related. All are necessary. The apostles and prophets have gone before us, but they are still active within the household. They are the foundation stone. And Christ is the all-important cornerstone which holds the household together.

The purpose of this living temple is to be a dwelling place for Spirit. And that is what we are endeavouring to create in our life together in The Centre. As we meet this morning, we are the household of God in this place. We are in relationship with the heavens and in relationship with one another. Around us, although unseen, are the beings who guide our community and Brotherhood, who are our particular link with the heavens. We have a relationship with them and they with us. We have a relationship with all those who have trodden the path before us, with the saints and initiates, and they with us. And we have a relationship with one another as fellow members of the household of God.

Let's recognise today that what we do here in our community is of great importance. As a group we are the dwelling place of God, and through us his light can shine out into this world.

As we prepare to share the bread and wine with one another in this fellowship meal, we will have a time of silence in which we seek to become aware of our relationship with the heavens and with each other as part of the household of God.

So shall it be.

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