

As we continue thinking about how we should serve God as a 'holy priesthood' we come today in our studies in Acts to Acts 2:42-47 and we look at what I've called the embryonic church.

2,000 and more years after the start of the Christian church we are continually being encouraged to re-envisage church, to review how we do church, to pioneer new ways of doing church.

Mostly this is because of the fear that if we don't then church and the Christian faith will die out, which seems to me somehow to lack a trust in God whose church it is.

It is good to think about how we do church and not simply do what we have always done. However, while we may tinker with styles, times, settings and content we need to recognise from the Bible that there are some fundamentals which are essential to us doing and being church.

In this passage in Acts we see the church in its earliest form. What we see here is not a model church, to be copied and replicated down the ages, that's not why Luke has recorded this for us. What we see here is the dramatic start of the church and we see how, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the gospel moves from Jerusalem to Rome. So as we look at passages like this we must be wary of making doctrine out of a historical situation. We must not say because this happened then it must happen now or even must be the pattern for the church of today. However, having said that, it would seem that there are aspects of what was happening in Jerusalem which are echoed elsewhere in the New Testament and so give us some pointers towards being a healthy and growing church through which God reaches out and brings people to salvation.

The events in these verses took place when Jesus had died, risen and ascended. His disciples had been told to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit was given to them and then they would impact the whole world as witness for Christ Jesus.

Now the Holy Spirit has come. Peter has stood up and, as we heard last week, explained what was going on and 3000 have come to faith and here in these verses we get a bit of a picture of their life as the embryonic church.

### **1. They were eager to learn v42-43**

"They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching" (v42) "many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles" (v43). The early church submitted themselves to the authority of the apostles. That authority was in their teaching and demonstrated through the miracles. Last week saw from Acts 2:22 that Peter's testimony was that Jesus' miracles were God's sign that he was God. Here the miracles bear testimony that God was at work in a very special way through the apostles. However, it was the teaching of the apostles that they devoted themselves to, that they stuck to like glue. This was the work of the Holy Spirit. As John Stott put it, "The Spirit of God leads the people of God to submit to the word of God".

These 3000 had heard God speak through Peter on that day of Pentecost. They accepted what was said and believed in Jesus. However, you can almost imagine some of them waking up the next morning and thinking, “what happened there then? What do I do now?”

I was with my daughter Anna last weekend. She has four children and another on the way!

It was very interesting watching feeding time, I use the term purposely! Caleb, the eldest who is six will feed himself and will eat just about anything going and as much as he can get away with. Beth, who was five last Saturday, will also feed herself but while breakfast is her favourite meal she is not always so keen at the other meals. Toby who is number three will eat well but usually needs his food cut up for him so that he can manage it. Joel number four still needs help in feeding! Anna’s concern in all this was to ensure that they were fed and fed with proper and suitable things so that they grow fit and healthy.

That is what took place here in Jerusalem with these people. Having come to faith the key was then to nurture and build that faith. This was a massive nurture group. It was a nursery experience as all these new Christians needed feeding and more they wanted the food. Peter encouraged the Christians he was writing to “like new born babies crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” (1 Pet 2:2).

Clearly they craved that pure spiritual milk! As God worked in them their desire was to learn more about their faith and supremely about the Lord Jesus Christ. To do that they went to the Apostles who had been with Jesus. That was true of these new born babes in Christ and, as with Anna’s tribe, babies still need feeding as they grow up.

As we look through the rest of the N.T. we see that learning from the word of God and especially the apostles’ teaching was seen as essential. So the Colossian Christians were encouraged to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16). It is just as vital for us today. Just as you take your five a day seriously so even more so should you be taking the word of God seriously. We too, like those early Christians, should be devoted to the apostles teaching. It is through this that the church of today like the early church will be “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).

In Acts we see the church devote itself to the apostles’ teaching and that brought growth as we see in 6:7, “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith”. Do you see how Luke described it as the word spreading and he equated that with the church growing.

If the church is to grow in terms of making disciples it will be as we are faithful in teaching the word and as people are faithful in growing in the word.

Let me ask you are you getting fed? How are you getting fed? As I look round in one sense it is a bit like the table last Saturday! I know some of you are a bit like Caleb making sure you get lots of food. You are here regularly listening to the sermon and some even taking notes. Some make time to listen to the download or read the notes on line. Some are in homegroups and reading the Bible for yourself at home often using Bible study notes.

Others are a bit like Beth sometimes eager but at others not so bothered. Some are like Toby and need the word as it were cut up and in smaller chunks so that you can deal with it better. Some of you are like Joel and still new in the faith eager to feed but perhaps could do with someone sitting one to one with you a bit like a nursing mother.

Wherever you are on your journey of faith we can help you but what I cannot do is put in you that desire to learn, only God can do that.

There are opportunities to hear God's word. Every Sunday is an opportunity and if we can't be here one Sunday then the sermons are online. There are the homegroups which meet regularly where we can get a bit more help. This week we start Lifeshapes a great opportunity to grow in our discipleship through the apostles teaching.

I would simply want to encourage us all to have a look at what and how we are learning from the word of God and ask the question am I as devoted to God's word as I might be?

They were eager to learn

## **2. They enjoyed fellowship v42-46**

"They devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread" (v42), "All the believers were together and had everything in common" (v44). Here is another mark of the embryonic church which we also see elsewhere in the New Testament. In that they enjoyed fellowship in worship and in practical caring and sharing.

As we look at v46 we see that daily they met up in the Temple for the more formal prayer services. They also met in their homes. There as they broke bread together they remembered Jesus action at the last supper and through that his death. Coming together for worship formally and informally was part of this embryonic church and it has something to say to us. The writer to the Hebrews encouraged the Christian not to stop meeting together but to encourage each other. That's a huge part of corporate worship where we gather together and in our worship encourage each other. They also had this practical caring of selling possessions so that they could care for those who had nothing. It was probably this that gave rise to the statement in v47 that they were "enjoying the favour of all the people" because people could see the way that they loved and cared for each other. Here was a group who had shared a common experience of hearing the gospel, repentance and baptism. Now they were sharing a common devotion to the apostles teaching and to the

community. They were devoted to each other. For them fellowship was essential and I believe it still is.

I was intrigued by the story of Libby Clegg in the Paralympics. To start with she has a deteriorating eye condition which means she has only peripheral vision. She was told she had to wear a blindfold and was reclassified. Then after her heats in the 100 metres she was disqualified because her guide Chris Clarke was deemed to be pulling her along. But she won her appeal and won her gold medal. Here is a woman who needs help being guided and encouraged by another person. It's an image of the way in which we can encourage and pull each other along in the Christian race. We need each other.

The story of the Bible is the story of God making a people and as such there is no understanding of the solitary Christian instead we see the believer who is part of a family, a church where he or she worships with their brothers and sisters and is active in ministry and support.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship. So again I put that before us as it echoes down through the rest of the New Testament and ask are we devoted to the fellowship either here at Christ Church or, if you are here as a visitor or listening on line, where you live?

Fellowship is key to the growth of the church. We should not deny others the joy of our fellowship by arbitrarily missing those key times of fellowship of which Sunday is one.

Friends are we sufficiently devoted to the fellowship to do everything possible to be with the fellowship when we meet and to give all we can to sustain and help the people of God to grow?

### **3. They were devoted to prayer v42**

Already we have seen in Acts the apostles together in prayer and later we see something of the power of prayer. Here it is just noted that they devoted themselves to prayer. It can be missed in a long line of things they stuck to like glue but it was by no means an add on. Prayer was a natural part of their life as Christians together and of their growth, both spiritually and numerically.

Scripture calls us to pray and devote ourselves to pray. I hope we are all praying, praying for many things, for our nation in these difficult times, for our church leaders, and especially for our church and its mission under Jesus. Prayer as we saw before is our "spiritual act of worship". It is part of our role as a holy priesthood.

### **4. They were growing v47**

'God added those who were being saved'. What Luke calls us to note here is that God was at work. He was at work to turn people's lives around and bring them to salvation. Is that not what we as a church long to see? We long to see God at work because unless God does it we will not see anyone come to faith. That is why prayer is so vital. But we should not miss the point that Luke was making

here that God was mightily at work in those days adding daily to the number of those who accepted Jesus as Saviour.

In that sense how they were saved is not important. The focus is on God. God was saving people and adding them to the number of the church and that means the church was growing!

The church was growing and it was “enjoying the favour of all the people” because it was a force for God and for good. There was learning, fellowship, prayer and growth. All of these things we can see as continuing through the pages of the N.T. and through that as relevant for us. So this morning we open ourselves to the word of God and ask God to speak to us as individuals about our walk with Jesus. Am I devoted to the word of God, to the fellowship, to prayer to growth? What does God want to say to me today that I may hear and respond?