

In July 2011 the General Synod of the Church of England was warned that by 2020 the Church of England would no longer be “functionally extant”. In 2011 the average age of members was 61 and so about 20 years on large numbers of them would no longer be around.

It could be a depressing picture but certainly here at Christ Church, while we are not an Anglican Church as such, we are seeking to buck the trend and to continue to grow. This is what DISCOVER is all about. It is great having come on board evenings as we did on Tuesday for those who are new to Christ Church. However, many are already Christians coming here as they move from other areas. So, if the church is to continue beyond 2020 and if we are truly to grow we need to see people coming to faith in Jesus. We need, going back to the first in this series, to see people being born again. At the heart of such growth will be the gospel, which Paul reminds us in Romans 1:16 “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes”. However, the gospel needs to be set within the context of a healthy and vibrant 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 of the gospel message and we see how 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’s going on and 3000 have come to faith. No wonder in Acts 6 the 12 apostles felt they needed some help! But meanwhile here in these verses we get a bit of a picture of their life as the emerging church.

1. There was learning v42-43

“They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching” “many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles”. The early church submitted themselves to the authority of the apostles. That authority was 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. But now it was a case of what had they believed?

You can almost imagine some of the 3000 waking up the next morning and thinking, "what happened there then? What do I do now?"

As you may know my daughter Anna had her third child just before Christmas. It was very interesting watching feeding time, I use the term purposely! Caleb, the eldest will feed himself and will eat just about anything going and as much as he can get away with. Beth, the middle one needs help with feeding but she too has a voracious appetite. The tiny baby certainly would scream to let mum know he needed feeding. Anna's concern in all this was to ensure that they were fed and fed with proper and suitable things.

That is what took place here in Jerusalem with these people who had 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 "like new born babies crave pure spiritual milk" (1 Pet 2:2).

That was what happened. As God worked in them their desire was to learn more about their faith and supremely about the Lord Jesus Christ and the natural thing was to go to the Apostles who had been with Jesus. That was true of these new born babes in Christ but, as with Anna's tribe, babes 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) and 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 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 not converts 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 over Christmas and 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. You are in homegroups and reading the Bible for yourself at home often using Bible study notes.

Others are a bit like Beth and you still need a bit of help with your food but are eager to learn. That's fine we can help and I can certainly suggest Bible reading notes or books to help. Some of you are like Toby and very new in the faith and perhaps could do with someone sitting one to one with you a bit like a nursing mother and again we can help with that.

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, stuck to, God's word as I might be?

There was learning

2. There was fellowship v42-46

"They devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread", "All the believers were together and had everything in common". Here is 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. So in 3:1 we read Peter and John went up to the temple "at the time of prayer". 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 emerging 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 and that's a huge part of corporate worship of gathering and in our worship encouraging 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. Tertullian a very early Christian writer describing how outsiders viewed Christians said that they say 'See how these Christians love one another'. The fellowship of Christians must be both spiritual and practical. James explains this a bit more in James 2:15-16, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" In a world which today as then is individualistic and selfish such actions still stand out and speak to those around us.

Fellowship was essential and still is. The story of the Bible is the story of God making a people and as such there is no understanding of the solitary Christian but 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?

The image used elsewhere in the Bible of the church is that of the body and that helps in terms of understanding our devotion to the fellowship because last Sunday this body had an elbow, several fingers and an ear missing. Mind you we did have a couple of extra toes!! I note that the elbow, or Gordon Randall as he is known to some, is here today after his role in the Diocese took him to another church. We missed you Gordon as we miss anyone who is not here.

The church grows as each person takes their part in the body of Christ in worship and caring. 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. There was prayer v42

Throughout Acts we see the power of prayer and here in one sense 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. We see this as the story of Acts goes on and how in Acts 4:24 with Peter and John having been released “they raised their voices together in prayer to God” after which “the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (4:31). Prayer was a natural part of their life and especially of their growth both spiritually and numerically. Earlier in the year we looked at prayer in relation to DISCOVER as we looked at Paul’s encouragement to the Colossians to “devote yourselves to prayer” (Col 4:2). It is essential. It reminds me of the story of Eric Alexander, a great Christian minister in Glasgow from 1977-1997 who is reputed to have said to a young woman at the end of a prayer meeting, “My dear I notice you didn’t pray in the meeting”. “Oh” she replied I didn’t feel like praying.” “Prayer,” he retorted “is not a glandular condition but a command of the Lord”.

I’m not sure I would have quite put it like that but the point is there that Scripture calls us to pray and devote ourselves to pray. I hope we are all in prayer, prayer for many things, for our nation in these difficult times, for our church leaders, and especially for our church and its mission under Jesus.

4. There was growth 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 as ever 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?