

I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

(Acts 2.42-47 and Matthew 16.13-18)

Personal Words

Today was to be our annual meeting service where we review the past year, celebrate what God has been doing, choose and commission new leaders, thank individuals for outstanding service and look forward to the year ahead. It is a service where we cast vision for where we believe the Lord is taking us and get on board.

Obviously, we can't have a meeting like that when we're all sitting at home. It needs people gathered in one place. Because of the Covid-19 situation, the Church of England has extended the date limit for annual meetings by five months to the end of October. We have not yet set a revised date for ours at Saint Mary's but I don't expect it will be possible before my last Sunday which is to be 7 June.

So, I wanted to put on record my thanks - to you all - for everything as I have journeyed with you over the last 12 years. It truly has been a privilege to serve you as vicar here.

Introduction

When we held a Vision Day back in November with the aim of mapping out our aspirations for the future direction of travel of Saint Mary's, we based our reflections on a passage from the Acts of the Apostles; a book which could just as easily be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit always brings new things. He brings new spiritual life, new vitality, new desires, new ways of looking at things, new songs, new creativity in worship. The Holy Spirit renews the church.

Unfortunately, the Coronavirus outbreak has meant we have had to put developing the vision day outcomes on hold until things get back to normal, but this is still a good time to reflect on what God is calling us to be and to do at saint Mary's.

The passage we reflected on back in November and our first reading today (Acts 2.42-47) says that the first Christians "devoted themselves to 1. the apostles' teaching, 2. to fellowship, 3. to the breaking of bread and 4. to prayer." We're going to look at each in turn this morning.

Everything else in the rest of the passage (the awe, the signs and wonders, the sharing, the gathering, the favour and the growth) is important but it all flows out from those four core activities.

But before we do, notice a little phrase that slips in almost unnoticed at the beginning. "They devoted themselves..." To devote is to give, to dedicate, to consecrate... Another version says, "They committed themselves." Another says, "They continued steadfastly."

The great Olympic decathlete Daley Thompson used to love Christmas Day not for the turkey and mulled wine but because *no one else trained then*. He would go through his paces on December 25th knowing that he would gain a tiny advantage on his competitors - because they were all taking the day off and putting on the pounds. He utterly *devoted himself* to being the best decathlete on earth. He, like that Jerusalem church, was single-minded and committed.

Have you ever heard the "Eulogy for Saint Elsewhere's Dearest Member?" It's a fictional and tongue-in-cheek tribute for the funeral of an imaginary church member and it goes like this:

"We were all saddened to learn last week of the passing of one of our church's most valuable members, *Someone Else*, whose death has created a void that will be difficult to fill. *Someone Else* was with us for many years, and did far more than a normal person's share of the work. Whenever committees were formed, this wonderful person was looked to for inspiration as well as results. When there was a financial need, everyone assumed, dear *Someone Else* would make up the difference. Whenever there was a job to do, one name was at the top of everyone's list - *Someone Else*. "Let *Someone Else* do it!" was a common refrain from the pews. *Someone Else* was a wonderful person, sometimes appearing superhuman, and will be sorely missed. RIP."

I wonder if I am guilty at times at leaving my fair share for *Someone Else* to take care of... Anyway, let's look at these four vital characteristics of the first Jerusalem church.

1) Teaching

It is highly significant that the first thing on the list is teaching. Note here that the teaching referred to is quite specific. It is *the apostles'* teaching, that is to say the 12 chosen by Jesus to be with him, to receive authority from him and to pass on what he said, uncorrupted, in the form of the New Testament.

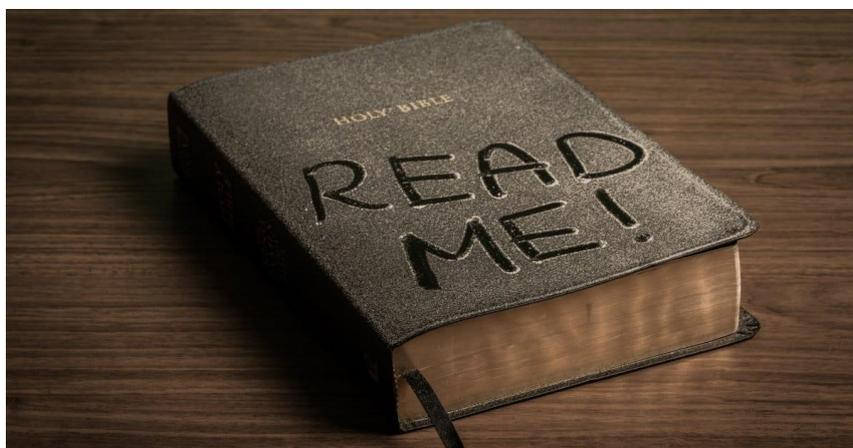
On a scale of one to ten, one being 'not at all' and ten being 'an awful lot', how devoted do you think you are to reading and taking on board the teaching of Scripture?

Not at all devoted					Really super devoted				
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Healthy churches hold the Bible in high esteem because it is God's word, it is breathed by him, and therefore has unique authority. Jesus never said, "The words I speak to you are quite interesting." He said, "The words I speak to you are spirit and they are life."

The Bible has never been a popular book with Christianity's enemies because they understand its power. The Communists pulped it and used it as toilet paper. Islamists kill you for owning it. Stand-up comedians scoff at it. Satanists burn it. Liberals and intellectuals continue to belittle it.

In the Medieval era it was trapped in Latin so no one could understand it and, in any case, only priests had access to it. But it goes on being the best-selling and most translated book in the world.



A hundred years ago, an American missionary called William Young took the gospel to the tribes of what was then called East Burma. He learned the generic language of the region and one day he was preaching in a marketplace, reading out the Ten Commandments. And, holding aloft his Bible with its white pages gleaming in the morning sunlight, he proclaimed the one God.

As he preached, some strangely-dressed men at the edge of the crowd pushed their way to the front. They were all agitated and excited. Overflowing with emotion they approached William Young and said, "We are from the Lahu tribe and we've been

waiting for you for centuries! We have prophecies that tell us that a pale man will come to us one day with a book from God that will set us free. We have even built meeting places ready for you. Please, you must come with us now."

Then they showed him rope bracelets that they wore. They said, "We have worn these since time immemorial. They are placed on us at birth. They symbolise our bondage to evil spirits. We know that you alone as the messenger of the one God can cut these from our wrists, when you have brought us the message from the one creator God.

In 1904, William Young baptized 2,200 Lahu tribespeople. In the next few years after that he baptized another 60,000. They had been waiting for God - and for the teaching of his apostles.

2) Fellowship

The next thing is what our translation calls "fellowship." Another version translates it "life together." In fact, the original Greek word *koinonia* has many meanings and no single English word seems to adequately express its range or depth.

It comes from a word meaning "mutual" but it carries the sense of joint participation in something with someone. It was used of conjoined twins where two individuals share the same bloodstream and even some vital organs. In fact, so dependent are conjoined twins on each other, it can be dangerous (and is often fatal) to separate them surgically.

One of the things Kathie and I love about going on holiday is finding a church for worship on the Lord's day. We have found all sorts of churches on our travels. Sometimes it isn't even in a language we can speak, but we have discovered that there are two words that *all* Christians say in *every* language; "Alleluia" and "Amen." So at least you can praise God together and you know when it's the end!

But there's a body language, an understanding, with the hallmark of joy and love in a gathering of Christians. Like a mobile phone picking up a signal, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is when the Holy Spirit in me says hello the Holy Spirit in you, and it's like coming home.

A few years back I read a review of a new book called *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Thom Rainer. The book contains 10 sad case studies on real churches that have

actually closed down. And Rainer examines the history of each church to try and work out if there is a common denominator for sick and dying churches.

Things like focusing too much on the golden age of the past, an orientation towards maintenance rather than mission, no difference in moral standards to those in the world, and a lack of appetite for prayer were highlighted repeatedly in church after church.

But what the book found was this: "More than any one item, these dying churches focused on their own needs instead of others." In other words, members became individualistic and self-absorbed.

It led me to produce a simple cut-out guide for keeping the church healthy. And here it is below.



How to Grow a Healthy Church

1. Cut along dotted line. 2. Rotate 180 degrees.

Authentic fellowship flows out to others on the edge of church life - and indeed totally outside of it. Are we keeping too much of God's love and blessing to ourselves? Or are we devoted to sharing it with others in, and outside of, Saint Mary's?

3) Breaking of Bread

The third thing is what Luke calls the breaking of bread. Is this just a reference to sharing meals or does it mean the Lord's Supper? In my view, the answer is "yes." In the early church the two overlapped, a bit like our annual agape supper (which we are sad to have missed this year).

They would share meals together and finish by breaking bread and pouring out wine to remember all that Jesus did for them.



It says they ate together with glad and sincere hearts. So there was joy and celebration. I really like the informal and spontaneous feel of these verses, though the word "sincerity" speaks of a certain dignity and reverence as well.

But what this shows us is really important; they were cross-centred. At the heart of their worship was a commitment to go back to the cross and remember what it's all about.

Jesus, in laying down his life, opened up direct access to God, won your salvation, forgave all your sins, defeated the principalities and powers, abolished ritual as a path to God, turned away the wrath of God against sin, secured peace with God for you and much, much more. The cross says it all. It's got to be at the centre.

4) Prayer

Lastly, "They devoted themselves to prayer." The truth is this; it's better to devote yourself to prayer than it is to immerse yourself in worry.

Practically everybody I know seems at least a bit anxious about all this virus and its effect on mental health, freedom of movement, the economy and so on. People are worried about their health, their relatives' health, their neighbours, their job, their bills, the value of their houses, their savings, their holidays, their pensions...

Such has been the dominance of Coronavirus on the news, that people have almost forgotten they have to worry about Brexit, terrorism and climate change as well! These things are all serious, of course and I don't mean to belittle them. But, as the evangelist J. John says, "If we prayed as much as we worry, we'd have a lot less to worry about."

Healthy churches put their trust in the Lord and pray. I hope very much that, as soon as we can get back to normal, we will revive the Thursday evening prayer meetings we had started before Lent. When we pray, God reveals his will, Christians get fired up, things happen and the kingdom moves forward.

The story is told (I don't think this is a true story but I find it funny) about a small town where a local businessman decided to open a casino. A group of Christians from a local church were upset about this so they planned an all-night prayer meeting asking God to miraculously intervene.



It just so happened that on the opening day, lightning struck and this casino burned down to the ground. So the casino owner sued the church, claiming that the prayers of the congregation were responsible for the damage. Faced with this expensive lawsuit, the church hired a lawyer to argue in court that they were in no way liable for this devastating fire.

At the end of the trial, the judge concluded the case saying, "How ironic! This casino owner now believes in the power of prayer to bring about an act of God - and the town's Christians don't!"

It's an amusing little story, but I hope that's not us! Do we really believe in the power of prayer? Are we devoted to it?

Ending

As I end, I want to comment briefly on today's Gospel reading. As we've been thinking about this vibrant and growing church in Acts 2 that we want to emulate, we must never imagine that we can produce any of this on our own by graft, or willpower, or even being passionately devoted, important as those things are.

Jesus said, "*I will build my church.*" He waited a long time to say those words. He held it in, and held it in, and held it in until the day Peter looked at him and said, "I know who you are, you're the Messiah - aren't you? - you're the Christ, the Son of the living God!" *Then*, at last, Jesus could say it. "Yes Peter! And this is the rock upon which I will build my church."

That was the first time Jesus ever used the word "church." He waited, and waited, and waited until that precise moment, because you can only build church with people who acknowledge and confess who Jesus truly is and have the courage to say it to a watching world. So let's declare afresh our belief in the risen Lord in the words of our affirmation of faith.