



Sermon: 7th May 2017

A picture paints a thousand words

Acts 2: 42-47; John 10: 1-10

What is the Church? I suppose we will all have our own ideas about what the answer is to that question. Of course, since its beginning in 30AD it has had different appearances at different times, from persecuted minority to a weapon of state, but I came across this description which might sound familiar.

There are 566 members in our church but 100 are frail and elderly. That leaves 466 to do all the work. But 80 are young people at College. That leaves 386 to do all the work. But 150 are in employment and feel overworked and tired. So that leaves 236 to do all the work. Of them 150 are busy parents with young children, which leaves 86 to do all the work. A further 46 have other commitments that are vitally important. That leaves 40 to do all the work. But 15 live too far away to come regularly so that leaves 25 to do all the work. And 23 say they've already done their bit for the church. That leaves you and me. And I'm exhausted. Good Luck to you.

Thankfully things here in Campsie are not quite that bad but this is a picture of church which is close to reality for many, and I suppose could potentially become a reality for many more. And it's a bit of a contrast to the reading from Acts this morning which gives us a quite different picture of church. In the early church, as St Luke describes it in this passage from the Acts of the Apostles, the members devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. The apostles performed many wonders and signs and everyone was filled with awe. The believers spent time together every day and sold their property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. They ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God. The communities they lived in viewed them very favourably.

This is a picture of an active, busy, caring, sharing, worshipping church which draws other people into its fellowship because the strength of the relationships and the evidence of their love and care for one another. No wonder the Lord was adding to their number daily.

It has taken a long time to get from there to what we know today. Although church today is not quite as bad as in my opening illustration many congregations do still struggle to keep things going and people are very busy and often overcommitted. But, although in some ways the church as it is described in the book of Acts might seem like an impossible dream or aspiration – how could we ever be like that? – nevertheless, there are attributes of that church that we can still recognise in our fellowship today and still others than we can copy.

Firstly, it was a learning church. Elsewhere, in the letters of the apostle Paul, he speaks of the unsearchable riches of Christ. In other words, we could spend a lifetime trying to understand the love of God in Jesus, a lifetime trying to comprehend what Christ did for us and how that makes a difference. We could spend a lifetime trying to explore what it means to be a Christian and we would never plumb the depths of all the implications of God's love for us, Christ's sacrifice for us, and the effect of that on our lives, both now and in the hereafter.

I was speaking with the children about the journeys that we take and of course, we often refer to the Christian life as a journey. I've quoted before from Bilbo Baggins and the Lord of the Rings, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." Bilbo, in a very un-Hobbit like fashion, found himself having adventures. And I think in the same way, the Christian life is an adventure. Every day is an opportunity to find out some new thing about God, to develop our relationship with him daily and, in the words of Richard, Bishop of Chichester in the 13th century, long before they were purloined by the authors of Gospels, to see him more clearly, to love him more dearly and to follow him more nearly.

The second thing we can note about it is that it was a sharing church. St Luke describes what amounts to a potluck supper. Everybody brought something, as they were able to afford it, and then everything was pooled and shared out to all who were present, rich and poor alike and so all were fed. It was a way of ensuring that those who didn't have enough didn't starve. They also held possessions in common, something which our society today could do well to learn from. Does every house with a garden in the same street need a lawnmower, for example? But, although we might not share our lawnmowers, we are a sharing church. We share with one another, we give to the church and to other charities. We share our time, our talents and our money. We share concerns and pray for one

another. Today Christian Aid brings to our attention our brothers and sisters in other countries who are less fortunate than we are and invites us to share from our resources to help them. Here in Britain we are safe and secure. It is right and good that we share the benefits of our relative wealth with those who are not so blessed, just as they did in the church in Acts.

The third thing that we can notice about the Christians of the early church is that they met to break bread together. It's an interesting phrase, "broke bread in their homes." The implication is that they ate together but that phrase carries connotations of the Last Supper, and certainly the early church was in the habit of celebrating what we call communion much more often than we do. It was at the heart of their fellowship meetings, and for them, much more consciously than it is for us I think, a statement of faith that the Lord was going to return. In the letter to the Hebrews Paul says to us, "do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, all the more as you see the day approaching"; the day in question being the day of the Lord's return. Perhaps, if there is something we can learn from the early church, if there is something we might like to copy, it might be that we break bread together more often. It might be that we more consciously think that every time we meet together the Lord's return is closer and let that thought affect and infect our attitudes, our activities, and our relationships.

And the last thing to notice about this early gathering of Christians is that it was a church which prayed and worshipped together. We are told that they persevered in prayer and on a daily basis they attended the Temple together. Worship was a huge part of their lives and it was that experience of worship, lively, vibrant, and living worship that spilled out into their daily lives and made them as a group so attractive.

Of course, over the years the church lost this attractive and engaging appearance. Sadly, the history of the church is one of dispute and schism. Our history, including as it does the Crusades, the Reformation, slavery, to name but three aspects of our past that are far from glorious, our history seems an unworthy legacy of that early church. But of course, that's not the end of the story. We can still learn from our past, and perhaps especially from our distant past, the very beginnings of the church. We are a learning, sharing, worshipping community who break bread together; perhaps the question is how can we become better at learning, sharing, worshipping, and anticipating the Lord's return as we break bread together. This is a question for each of us here today. For you folks just as much as for me, and if you have any ideas about how we can do any of these things

better, please share them with me. How can we learn more together? How can we share more of our lives with one another? Can we find more opportunities to break bread together, and in doing so, be aware that we are celebrating the death of the Lord, until he comes!

Because, I think that the better we get at doing all these things, the more we learn about the Christian faith, the more we will want to spend time together with our Christian family. And the more we want to spend time with one another because of our love for God, the more our worship will come alive. If it's lively now, how much more alive and vibrant with the presence of the Holy Spirit might it become! The Spirit will inhabit our praises even more than at present and others will be drawn to the vitality of our worship.

The picture of the church drawn for us in the Acts of the Apostles is an attractive one – people were drawn to it. We too can paint an attractive picture by the quality of our learning, sharing, worshipping congregation. Perhaps then, the Lord will add daily to our numbers, those who are being saved.