

Acts 2. 42 - 47

I'm sure there must be someone up in Church House who loves statistics: how many babies were baptised last year? How many weddings took place in church?

From the latest figures that dropped on my desk a fortnight ago, there are now 12000 retired clergy - and that's up 36% from 20 years ago, and the number of paid, *working clergy* is down 22% in the same period. What impact might this have on the mission of the local church? Far fewer leaders? More working in teams?

Interesting as all this is, I wonder whether we might gain more insight by examining the New Testament Church described in the Scriptures, and seeing how we measure up. What can we learn?

The Word of God brings us back to the basics of Church life. The distinctive marks of the local church are clearly set out for as a *model* and a *pattern*.

Acts chapter 2 is a good starting place. You'll remember the infant church had just increased 26 fold (that's the first ecclesiastical statistic from 120 to 3120) and then Luke gives us this little summary of fellowship life. The new converts' faith expressed itself in 5 ways.

First, **intellectually**. *V42 they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching*. The early church was eager to learn. Every opportunity was taken to hear directly from the Apostle eye-witnesses of Christ, about Jesus's teaching and his expectations of them.

It was said rather quaintly by a Minister: "*When my people attend Church they leave their heads under the pews!*" He felt that folk switched their minds off – and, in some places, there is almost a rebellion against serious study. "Experience" - being caught up (in an emotional sense) sometimes overshadows the learning process. Yet, we're called to *gird up our minds, to purify our souls by our obedience to the truth, to long for pure spiritual milk, to be well grounded, and well able to handle the word of God*.

Friends, we need to be serious about really getting to grips with the Scriptures. Can we say with Tom Wright: The Bible is the book of my life; it's the book I *live with*; the book I *live by*; the book I want to *die by*.

Some may feel that they have grasped the Bible's message, and that's enough. "*Nobody ever outgrows Scripture*" wrote Charles Spurgeon. "*The book widens and deepens with our years.*" It has been said: We grow in proportion as we know. But let's make sure it's the right kind of knowledge. The Holy Spirit's aim is to guide us into truth and help us to apply the lessons learnt. For what is a *knowing head* without a *fruitful heart*?

Then, the early church developed **corporately**. v42 refers to *fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer*. They met together for worship; they recalled Christ's victory as they broke bread together; they met together for prayer.

You can't read the early chapters of Acts without realising the importance of corporate prayer. Chapter 1 v14 *They all joined together constantly in prayer*. Chapter 4 v 24 *When they heard this (that's opposition from the Council) they raised their voices together in prayer to God*. The new deacons were presented to the apostles (Chapter 6) *who prayed...*

Coming together to seek God's guidance or blessing was an integral part of Church life; no new initiative would be launched without corporate prayer. That's a challenge to us, isn't it? For the early Christians it was fundamental; have we lost that desire to come before the Lord in prayer?

They worshipped together – joyfully, with thanksgiving – and that was a corporate commitment. They met together.

It was a *common life* together which naturally spilled over from the more formal times into the "everyday". They enjoyed each other's company.

The past weeks have tested our Church fellowship: have we cared for one another (as far as possible) during the lockdown? Have we been diligent in showing our support – on the phone, through our virtual meetings?

It's an important truth that when we take God for our God, we take his people for our people. We mustn't confuse social fellowship – which has its place as we relax together as a Church family – with spiritual fellowship. We need to encourage one another and build one another up in the Lord. The corporate life.

The third mark of the early church was **financial**. Their mutual concern for one another found expression in practical help. Those who had plenty recognised the need to share their possessions. **v44** *they had all things in common*. **v45** *selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need*.

In Chapter 4 Luke tells us this early 'welfare state' proved effective v34 *there was not a needy person amongst them*.

Whilst the pooling of resources appears not to have been a formal or a permanent arrangement, and therefore not a *mandatory requirement* for the Church fellowship today, the principle of sharing must surely be an abiding one. *"If a brother or sister is ill clad and in lack of daily food – writes James – what use is it to say, "Go in peace, be warmed, and filled" without meeting the needs of the body?"*. An obligation, then, rests on the church of Christ to render practical support.

St Simon's has a generous spirit, but we might (as a Church) find ourselves exercised greatly when the country returns to something more normal. Christian missions and charities are struggling to balance their books. Some of our own activities may require an injection of money to get them restarted. Can we rise to the challenge?

Intellectually – corporately – financially – also **Socially**.

The early Christians were respected. Their neighbours sat up and took notice of them. These people were different. They stood apart from their fellow residents. There was something distinctive about their way of life (v47) *praising God and having favour of all the people*.

A Church having a good name and reputation in the community is essential. It only needs one embittered mother upset by not getting her baby christened to gossip at the School gate, or a Church newsletter to cause offence and the parish comes alive with venom. We may not think we make the headlines often, but “bad news” can spread and be quite damaging.

The reports of the early church were favourable – **chap 5 v12**: *The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. v13* no one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.

Intellectually – growing in knowledge and understanding

Corporately – growing in fellowship and developing the common life

Financially – supporting one another in need

Socially – having a good standing amongst the local population

Fifthly, **numerically** (v47) their astonishing growth was a divine work – “*the Lord added*”. It was a continuous increase: the Lord added to their number *day by day* and it was a progressive experience – *those who were being saved* – the curious became the interested; the interested became the seekers; the seekers became the saved. It was a constant happening, as the believers witnessed and moved out amongst the city dwellers.

What was it that stimulated this growth? Of course, the Holy Spirit was doing his work, but wasn't part of the appeal their love for one another, their joy in worship, their different lifestyle? And aren't those marks which still attract today – warmth of fellowship, meaningful worship from the heart, and living out our faith in the community?

Now, before we leave this passage, I want to draw your attention to two different responses that were evident in those early days of the Church. They go quite

strangely together: v43 *everyone was filled with awe*. Then, at the end of v46 *they ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God*.

At the same time, we see awe (or fear as in some versions) and joy. The activities of the Church were marked by these two very different qualities.

Fear (and that's a better translation) is mentioned several times in these early chapters. In the episode over Ananias in Acts 5 we have *great fear came upon all who heard it*, and the after-effects were again "*great fear seized the whole church*" (5.11). In Acts 9 – another of Luke's little summary verses we find *the church living in the fear of the Lord* (v31).

Now, obviously we don't want to see people terrified of coming to our services, but we need to keep before us the thought of a holy God and have that spirit of reverence and awe.

It was old Bishop Ryle who said: *We must take our whole heart to the house of God and worship and hear like those who listen to the reading of a will*.

Isn't that being attentive and expectant? Realising we are in the presence of the living God and waiting to hear from Him?

But, alongside that fear and reverence is joy. It was another common quality amongst the early believers. Paul exhorts the Philippians to rejoice in all circumstances, whether in hardship or when things were going well.

Now, joy isn't light-heartedness or mirth, but it's a gladness of heart which comes from the Holy Spirit – from knowing that we are dearly loved children of God.

And, when we resume our Services at St Simon's shouldn't there be a blend of these two qualities of fear and joy? Our holy God, in his mercy, has delivered us by his mighty hand in perilous times, and a deep-seated joy that we belong to Him, and He has called us into His Service.

Let's pray. Jesus, Lord of the Church, we praise you that you have called us to yourself and blessed us through membership of your serving community here in Southsea. May your Spirit teach us to value our fellowship together, and give us grace always to worship reverently and witness joyfully for you and your kingdom in this place. To your honour and glory. Amen