

Acts 2:42 to the end 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Today I'm preaching on a passage from Acts chapter 2, which although only contains 5 small sentences, nevertheless conveys the contagious friendship, love and joy in the Lord, of a relatively small group of people, such that other people wanted to join them.

In an agricultural world where long hours of hard work in a hot country was very gruelling, seeing a group of people who had risen above all that, and were clearly very happy would have been very attractive to other people, and of course people wanted to find out what it was that had transformed their lives so dramatically.

The overall picture, which is described in verse 42, could easily be the kind of summary of a Christian church today when it is working well, because verse 42 contains all the elements of a well run church, and remains the pattern for the churches today.

There is an account of the apostles teaching about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, about the fellowship that was being built up through the apostles' teaching, about the apostles obeying Jesus' command by celebrating the Eucharist in remembrance of him, and of following Jesus' example and teaching about prayer.

The apostles, at this time were the core of this expanding Christian church, who Jesus had especially selected to continue his work when he had gone.

And there was so much importance given to this select team that right at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we are told that they appointed Matthias to replace Judas as the twelfth disciple.

The early church also, in recognition of the vital role the apostles teaching played in the expansion of the church, appointed Deacons to take care of administration and other day to day duties so that the apostles could devote all their time to teaching.

These four elements teaching, fellowship, Eucharist, prayer and a fifth the generosity of spirit expressed in verse 44, namely helping the poor and those in need, are, I would suggest, the most important elements that have to be evident in a mission shaped church today, and I am going to deal with each one in turn.

Our reading starts with the words They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles; The New Jerusalem Bible starts, "They remained faithful to the teaching of the disciples" and other translations have, "Remained steadfast".

And this verse which emphasises the importance of teaching also puts pressure on those who preach or teach the gospel of Christ, because everyone who accepts the role of teacher accepts the responsibility of staying faithful to Christ's teaching.

Staying faithful to the gospel is important because it is not our gospel, it is God's gospel, which, as present day disciples of Christ, we are passing on to the next generation.

Those who teach here in church through preaching or through lessons at Sunday school, or who facilitate at house groups or on specific courses such as start courses, are, as the apostles were, the core of the church, and their input is still the most essential ingredient to growth of the church and also here at St Michael's.

It is the gospel of Christ which is what we are about; numerous social events, raising money for the upkeep of our buildings, all the maintenance we do in church and in the graveyard are all important tasks which have to be done, but people will only stay if they hear the gospel of Christ.

The five verses from our reading also express the joy which is being generated within the fellowship, a joy that I can relate to, because I too get joy from being in fellowship with this church family, which has been a life line to me in the past two years, and I know that to be true for many other people as well.

For those who have the gift of welcoming people, of ease of communication and who are kind hearted, please continue to be so, your contribution to this church and to its growth is significant.

It is significant because initially people may come to church because a friend does or their parents do, or they come through their own initiative, and it is the welcome they get in the first instance which will bring them back.

But while they may come initially for social reasons, in the long run it will only be the gospel of Christ that will keep them here.

We heard recently of how Thomas wasn't in the upper room when Jesus showed himself to have risen from the dead, and how he had missed that most dramatic moment in history when Jesus appeared to the other disciples.

Unless we stay in fellowship with other Christians unless we stay close to each other we too may miss out on an historical moment in our lives.

Families only work well when they keep in close contact with each other and this is also true for the Christian family we call the church, we need to stay in fellowship with each other if we are to stay faithful to Christ.

This brings us nicely to the Eucharist known in the book of common prayer as Holy Communion, because the Eucharist is essentially a fellowship meal to remember the life and sacrifice of our lord at Calvary and of his rising from the dead.

Jesus' death at Calvary was a significant moment in history only to be overshadowed by his resurrection three days later, because had Jesus not risen from the dead none of us would be here today and there wouldn't be a church building here either.

That being the case I am not surprised that within days of Jesus' ascension into heaven, that the very first Christians started to celebrate that most significant moment in history, the resurrection from the dead of our Lord, which we celebrate in the Eucharist.

And although at my age I don't look forward to change nevertheless it is vital to make the celebration of Jesus' life, death and resurrection available to as many people as possible.

This is why, that in a changing world that we live in, the PCC are making slight but subtle changes to some of the 9.30 services to try and make the gospel of Christ available to many more younger people than is currently the case,

The changes in the services is in direct response to the command given us in Matthew chapter 28, the command to teach the gospel of Christ to all nations and to do that we must make it accessible to as many people as possible.

The fourth element in Luke's list is prayer which underpins all the previous three facets of the Christian church because prayer changes everything, it acknowledges that this is not man's work but God's work.

I have often started my private prayers by saying, "Without you Lord I can achieve nothing, with you all things are possible" and that is true for all of us, so for everything we do we need to turn to God in prayer, as indeed I did in writing this sermon.

It cannot be over emphasised that prayer is a vital element in our Christian life.

We need prayer now for what is arguably the biggest project since building the Pastoral Centre, namely the St Mary's project, we need prayer to underpin our initiative to be a better mission shaped church, we need prayer to go forward in trying to get younger people and families into our church, we need it to repair the rose window and to repair the church spire which again will need prayer.

Prayer is like oil in a car engine, with oil in the engine it will run without trouble, without oil the engine will seize up and stop, without prayer our church is weakened, if not seriously flawed.

We now come to verse 44 the generosity of spirit. The generosity of spirit to a great extent is the proof that the body of Christ is working well, because without generosity towards our fellow human beings then God's love is not being demonstrated and the church is essentially dead.

We can only express our love for God through our love for other people.

St John wrote in his 1st letter to fellow Christians in chapter 4 verse 20, “If anyone says, 'I love God', yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen”.

Generosity of Spirit is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the manifestation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated by the outpouring of our love for other people.

The last sentence of our reading, verse 47, reads, “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved”.

The rewards for a generous mission shaped church is of course, we hope, a growth in the number of worshippers, but more importantly and as is expressed in verse 47 the real reward is the increase of those being saved.

And it is to this end, the saving of people's souls, that all our prayers and energy towards making the gospel of Christ more accessible to more people, should be aimed.

Amen