

A sermon Preached by Emma Hodge at St. Michael & All Angels' church, Sandhurst on Sunday 24th April 2016.

I want to start by asking you a question, what do our readings today have to do with our life as a church and our Annual Church Meeting?

The answer is a lot, all of the readings relate to our corporate life, in various aspects, however as I don't have a couple of hours to explore everything in the readings, I would like to offer my apologies if I don't focus on some of the areas you would like to have explored, I am afraid you will have to explore these on your own at home,

Some of the topics I am not going to explore include

- Why the Jewish food laws don't apply to Christians
- How rumours can be for good and bad
- How the Lord makes us overcome our internal struggles

And these are just some of the points from the Acts reading, there are other points in the reading from Revelation and the reading from St. John's Gospel.

Instead I am going to focus on these main points

- The role of prayer and visions in our life as a church,
- Accountability

I am also going to focus on the reading from Acts, which is in some ways part 2 of a much longer reading. In Part 1 (which is Chapter 10 of Acts) we have Cornelius who was a centurion in Caesarea, who prayed and saw in a vision, of Peter coming to him and his household, we also have Peter who is praying in Joppa (some 40 miles away from Caesarea) who sees a vision of a tablecloth full of food which is forbidden to be eaten according to the Jewish food laws and God telling him to eat it, Peter declines from eating it insisting that he always keeps the law but God tells him to eat, God also tells Peter to go with the people who had come from Cornelius' house to fetch him. Peter and his fellow believers then goes to Cornelius and Peter speaks to the Cornelius' whole household and with the power of the Holy Spirit they are all converted to Christianity.

This story, along with many others from the early church have parallels to our church life today. Both Peter & Cornelius were men of prayer, they had visions and were obedient to the Lord; likewise there are people in our church who are people of prayer, people who have visions (and at our APCM later today we will hear about part of the vision for a families worker) and people who are obedient to the Lord. As well as being blessed with having people who have all three characteristics we are also blessed with many more people who have one or two of the characteristics.

While visions are not something that everyone will encounter, prayer and being obedient to the Lord is something that we all can do. Prayer is at the heart of our Christian faith, it is simple conversing (both talking and listening) to God, as if we were chatting with a wise friend and our individual prayer lives contribute to our prayer life as a church.

Our corporate prayer life takes many forms and the variety depends on several factors including which service we attend or who is opening or closing a meeting in prayer, the variety reflects our own individual needs and preferences, and over the years the styles of prayers have changed and will continue to do so in the future as we all change and new people come in and take a role in our corporate prayer life, and there is always room for more people to take part in this ministry.

Our corporate and individual prayer life influences every aspect of our church life, later today, at our annual church meeting, we will hear about many different aspects of our church life and while prayer may or may not be mentioned directly, it will have played a part in every aspect of our life.

So let us now move from prayer to accountability

We heard in our reading from Acts that Peter was called to account for his actions, and the actions of his fellow believers by a group of Christians in Jerusalem. This wasn't just because the church council in Jerusalem wanted to know what they had been up to, but part of the reason was that they were concerned that Peter's actions could bring them trouble as Peter and the fellow believers had broken some Jewish laws.

Peter gave an account of his actions but he was not alone, he had with him fellow believers who had been with him both in Joppa and Caesarea, and they supported and were eye-witness to the events that took place in Caesarea.

So in our reading today there are three separate groups, all with distinctive roles,

- 1) Firstly Peter, he was an apostle, responsible for preaching a sermon which converted Cornelius' household and Peter was responsible for many of the decisions of the fellow believers who supported him and this leads us onto the
- 2) The second group of people, the fellow Christians who were with Peter. They had many roles during this time including being eye-witnesses to events that took place and the
- 3) last group is the council in Jerusalem who had heard the rumours of what had happened in Caesarea, were concerned about the actions and wanted to understand why Peter acted the way he had.

In our corporate life as a church, we also have different groups, including the church council (PCC) and us as members of the wider church community. Each of the different groups have different roles, not just the obvious roles that they may carry out but often far less obvious ones.

Part of the role of the PCC is to act as the council in Jerusalem and ensure that actions that are taken as a church are in line with the church's role and vision statement, however this is not the only role the PCC has, they also have a role similar to the second group of people which is to support the church leaders.

Today is our Annual church meeting or the APCM and this is the occasion when we, the wider church community have the responsibility and challenge of holding the PCC and church leaders to account, just as the church council in Jerusalem held Peter and his fellow believers to account. Will you be attending the annual church meeting and taking your role in this important meeting, finding out why the PCC has taken the decisions they have?

There are numerous reasons why accountability was important to the life of the early church and why it is important to our life as a church today, however, it can be summed up in one word, that of "Love". Everything we do, just like the early church, is to Love God and this includes telling others about Jesus and showing God's love to others for as our reading from St John's Gospel put's it " I give you a new commandment that you love one another just as I have loved you, you also should love one another, by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another"¹.

Do we as individuals and as a church reflect this love?

8AM: Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven.²

9:30: our next hymn is based on the verse from the Gospel of St. John, as we sing it, can we also pray the words?

Amen

A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you, that you love one another as I have loved you.

By this shall all know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another;
by this shall all know that you are my disciples: if you have love one for another.

¹ John 13:34-35

² Matt 5:16 – from BCP after sermon