

SERMON – SUNDAY 3 MAY 2020 - Acts 2.42-end, John 10.1-10

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have those few verses from the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke describes life in the early church. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

These readings come round every three years, so I looked to see what I said in 2017. My sermon three years ago ended with this:

The verse of the Acts reading I find most positive is “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

We don’t have the goodwill of all the people, but we have the goodwill of a surprising number. We still meet to praise God, we are still glad and generous, we still break bread together in communion – and that’s the most important thing.

Ugghh. This is extremely difficult for us all. I would love to be able to break bread with you, to pray, teach and have fellowship (that’s the posh phrase for coffee after the service) - it’s now you realise what we’re missing.

We had Greater Chapter meeting on Tuesday - the Bishop and 53 other clergy (I didn’t know we’d got that many in the City, we don’t normally see that many when we come together - they probably all logged on because the Bishop was there!). Some of it was uplifting, some of it made me think, and some of it was a pain (you know how I feel about clergy en masse!).

BJ from the south of the City has survived a pretty bad dose of this virus and talked about what it felt like. Sarah from Chaddesden is having lots of funerals (more than me), she talked about how difficult it is, and how much unresolved grief there is going to be when all this is over. Paul from St Alkmund’s is heading up the City’s response to the food crisis, and doing an amazing job. It was marvellous to hear that supermarkets, the council, and many others are coming together - tons of food are being supplied and distributed, so that’s some good news.

There’s an interesting variety of the ways in which churches are keeping themselves together. One said that all his PCC members are meeting daily by zoom to pray together, another said their 27 house groups are doing it all on

line. Many are posting worship on line, filming themselves doing Morning and Evening prayer, and a variety of Sunday worship. Some of us are pointing people in the direction of the radio and television, flagging up what others are doing, and producing printed material. Whether this is sufficient, I don't know. But at the moment, I don't really know about very much.

What I do know is that I have had some lovely conversations and cheered people up - I've had some difficult conversations and helped people work through the pain of Covid19 - I've let people unload the stress of their jobs on me (my friends at the Crem are ensuring that 30 funerals a day can happen, that's one every half an hour in each chapel, that's taking its toll) - I'm coping with my own daughter who has probably got this virus (which is what happens when staff on the front line haven't got the PPE they need) - I'm coping with her mother (let's be honest, most of us want to go and see our kids, to sort them out and get them through this difficult patch) - I've helped people with the practicalities of moving their weddings - I've helped people get some food.

Does this come in category of "wonders and signs being done by the apostles." Probably not, but it's the best I can do.

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Three years ago I commented that "that sounds a bit radical, a bit too Mr Corbyn, perhaps we're all happier with 'strong and stable'." At his final Prime Minister's Questions Mr Corbyn has pointed out that Covid19 means the government has adopted many of his policies, far more money spent, far more state intervention than even he was proposing - it's a funny old world. There are conversations and discussions about how we re-balance Society, how we make it fairer, how we ensure that the people we now realise are key workers get the pay and the security that they deserve. It would be lovely to think that will happen, but I don't think the powers of evil, the powers of vested interests, the selfish nature of humanity - I don't think any of those forces are going to go quietly.

"Day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" – it happens in some churches (in those where they have 27 house groups and where the PCC meet together daily to pray), but that verse stresses me. One of things that I am encouraged by is the number of lovely people out there, people giving so much - people even giving their lives - in care and support. I'm sorry, but if anyone is going to tell me that they're not saved because they haven't given their lives to Jesus - I can't go with that any longer. So often religion seems happier putting barriers up, rather than helping people find life in all its fulness.

I did the funeral on Thursday of a lady who spent her whole life in institutions, someone with learning difficulties and mental illness. She's not had an easy life, and there were three of us to say farewell to her. I know that God will receive her into his love and care, no ifs, no buts.

I want people to come and enjoy worship, to come and feel close to God, to know Jesus as their friend, to find friendship in these churches. I have no doubt that Society is stronger when they do, I have no doubt that people's lives benefit when they do. It is great seeing how people in church are supporting each other, and how friendships made in our church buildings are getting people through. I have to hope that when we re-open, people will show us that they know we are important - ideally for a lifelong relationship, but if it's just for a short time, we still need to be here.

I will accept people, I will welcome people just as they are. I will proclaim (in word and deed) the belief that God calls men and women into a relationship with him, and that humans find their greatest fulfilment when they live in union with him. The Christian faith, and indeed all religions, try and connect humans with something bigger. However busy we are (and many are incredibly busy in this time of lockdown), take space in the day for peace, for prayer, for thought, for relaxation, to find inner peace, to find peace with God, to find peace with your fellow humans.

On the website, you might like to look at the service of Nones. It's a monastic service, and we'll think this afternoon of the monks of Darley Abbey who would meet in their church six times a day, every day, for prayer. Most of us are not called to that, but all human beings would all benefit from making space once, twice a day, for prayer. Even in lockdown, why is it that I, a Vicar, find it easier to make time to check facebook than I do to say my prayers?

We need to be people of prayer, our world needs it - and will always need it.

We are called to say to people that Jesus Christ loves you - even when the world is in chaos and a virus seems to have the upper hand. In a world of fear - perfect love conquers fear.

We want people to have a relationship with Jesus, because that involves forgiveness – and all human beings need to be forgiven. You cannot live without forgiveness, even when you live with the person you love most and have loved with for almost 40 years.

Forgiveness and justice are required in our society, and neither are proving easy to find. Three years ago, when (as I said) I last preached on this passage, we

were in the run up to a General Election (I'm trying to remember how many of them we've had in the last three years!). In the run up to that election, our Archbishops were in the news for the Pastoral letter they have written. These are the first two paragraphs of that letter:

The season of Easter invites us to celebrate and to renew our love of God and our love of neighbour, our trust and hope in God and in each other. In the midst of a frantic and sometimes fraught election campaign, our first obligation as Christians is to pray for those standing for office, and to continue to pray for those who are elected. We recognise the enormous responsibilities and the vast complexity of the issues that our political leaders face. We are constantly reminded of the personal costs and burdens carried by those in political life and by their families.

Our second obligation as Christians at these times is to set aside apathy and cynicism and to participate, and encourage others to do the same. ... The Christian virtues of love, trust and hope should guide and judge our actions, as well as the actions and policies of all those who are seeking election to the House of Commons and to lead our country.

It doesn't take much to re-write those paragraphs for where we are now. their words are as true today as they were three years ago, and will be when we look back in another three years.

Peter Barham, 2 May 2020