

The hallmarks of Church

St John and St Stephen's 30.04.23 Easter 4. Acts 2:42-end.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

John 10:10. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

As some of you know, this week Chris and I went north to attend his father's funeral in Cumbria, where he was laid to rest in the Howgill Fells, a place he'd always loved. Despite the sadness there was lots of consolation in the family gathering – and mainly because everyone who should have been there, was there, and we felt united.

As is often the case, the Church of England provided, in that village church and churchyard, (as did the next-door pub afterwards) a hospitable space for all to be included, and all to offer love and support to each other. And like funerals you may well have attended, we were joined together in our love for the person who had died, and in our desire to do the right thing. By God's grace, the experience offered consolation, and felt like the 'life abundant' spoken of by Jesus in our gospel.

This morning you might want to imagine a gathering you were part of, where there was a deep sense of fellowship and generosity. This is the picture we have this morning, as we read in Acts about the early church. Whether it's too soon to refer to this group as 'the early church' is perhaps uncertain, but this group of believers certainly had all the hallmarks of what would come to be known later as 'the Church'.

Let's look at these hallmarks, and at how recognisable they are to us who have been gathering as church for much of our lives (although it's newer to some of us). Which hallmarks of this group seem familiar to us – and which don't. Are there are elements of the early church that haven't translated well down the centuries. Are we missing something? Where is the encouragement for us, in this reading from Acts, and where is the challenge?

So, firstly, the hallmarks of Church.

Before we itemise them, an interesting question might be: What do other people who see us being church, think the hallmarks of church are? What do the children who come in here each day for collective worship, think the

hallmarks of church are? What do the teachers think they are (or should be?) What do the parents in the café think the hallmarks of our church are? That would be a topic for further thought, I think. I hope they've concluded that the hallmarks of church are kindness, joy and generosity, among other things.

The hallmarks of this group in Acts, then, are fourfold, as described in the first sentence of the reading. They are:

- 1) Teaching
- 2) Fellowship
- 3) Breaking of bread
- 4) Prayers

The continuity with our version of church today is strong: we can be encouraged that what is essential is still the core of what we do (without being complacent!)

Teaching - our Sunday worship always contains an element of teaching and that's enshrined in the Common Worship rubrics. It should be based on the teaching about Jesus as we have received it from the first apostles. In the C of E, we have apostolic succession enshrined in our ordination liturgies; other Christians have a reduced (or you might argue, more relevant) version of this. Teaching – or the sermon - doesn't have to be long and boring, though we haven't always remembered this. It can be, and often should be, an invitation to ask questions together – but there is always some element of its being nurturing to our life together.

Some churches over-stress teaching (I would suggest) and some under-stress it. I wonder what place the element of 'teaching' has had in how you've experienced church? Is it your opinion that the Church of England has recently departed from the teaching 'as we have received it', say, on human sexuality? Or is the case that 'the teaching' referred to here in Acts is more generally about Jesus, with the details to be worked out locally? If only we had a manual of 'the apostles teaching' referred to here. Then we could follow it to the letter, and never fall out with each other. But of course, this would negate the need for the Holy Spirit.

Fellowship. That's obvious – in church we have fellowship one with another - or it *may* seem obvious to us. We have to admit that some people report that a visit to church (not ours, I'm sure) left them feeling cold, or excluded, or there was simply no opportunity to talk. On the other hand, some people wish to

avoid the conversations over coffee. I'm sure we are sensitive to this on our Sunday mornings. Eventually though, church is about relationships of people centered around the love of God in Christ Jesus. One of the nicest things one can read in a parish profile, is how a congregation desires to be 'in relationship' with their new pastor, this being (I think) utterly primary, before we start doing the work of mission together.

The '*breaking of bread*'. This is an interesting phrase and is elaborated a few verses on, where it says 'they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and grateful hearts' (verse 46). Or the alternative translation: they 'broke bread from house to house'. We get a glimpse of how *fellowship in homes* was one of the building blocks of the early church. Homes became small hubs of welcome where the followers of Jesus got to know each other better – like homegroups.

The believers were also in the Temple, but there didn't seem to be such a gap between home life and religious observance that we have sometimes been afflicted by in later centuries.

The post Enlightenment sacred/secular divide has a lot to answer for. When people leave church, for whatever reason (and there are sadly many of them) it's often because they haven't been able to integrate their faith with the rest of their life – and so it becomes increasingly meaningless to attend a place on Sunday mornings, where you hear religious words, study an ancient book, and go home feeling flat. We rightly give thanks in our context for the vision of this 1970s rebuild, because we now have the resources to sit and eat with each other in the same place as we worship. Because the family of faith sitting and eating together is a powerful sign of the inclusivity in the heart of Christ.

Our non-Conformist brothers and sisters would probably argue that the Eucharist as we practice it in the more liturgical traditions is too far removed from the fellowship meals of the early church; but to others of course, it's utterly indispensable and the core of all our worship.

And finally, '*the prayers*'. A church that prays is a church through which the Holy Spirit can flow. But even here we constantly need refreshing. Such is the tendency of God's people to stagnate, that I expect, like me, occasionally you've been somewhere where the prayers have morphed into an institution in their own right where certain formalities are fundamental, and emotion and imagination firmly kept at bay. One of my colleagues in theological training became expert at mimicking the rise and fall of the predictable auditory

contours of Church of England Collects – where you always know what you're getting - and very amusing it was.

What else was going on in this vibrant picture of the early church?

- Wonders and signs
- Goods in common
- Numerical growth

It struck me, as I wrote this list, that we might not all agree these are strictly necessary as hallmarks of Church, or even desirable. At different points in church history, various branches of the Church have adopted one or other of these. Have we perhaps dispensed with signs and wonders too readily - or are we rightly wary? Signs and wonders divorced from Jesus, are not wholesome developments, even if they started out rightly anchored. Obliging people to share goods has sometimes morphed into monks, priests and bishops getting an awful lot richer than their flock.

A spirit of open generosity and expectation of God's action amongst us, however, are essentially good things. An ungenerous church with no expectation of the miraculous has almost certainly lost its way somewhere. Even the Parish Share system, with all its flaws, is based on the idea of sharing resources. Our parish hardship fund similarly.

Here in Acts, we seem to have an almost idealised portrait of the Church – before the deception of Ananias and his wife; before the martyrdom of Stephen; before the severe persecution mentioned in Chapter 8. It reminds us of the ideal picture of the assembly of God's people under Solomon, when the Temple worship was so all encompassing that the glory of the Lord fell, and the priests could not stand to minister (2 Chronicles 5).

Wonders and signs; all goods in common; rapid numerical growth. All of these have been contentious and, we have to admit, somewhat dispensable in the life of the English church at least. Some people are obsessed with figures of church attendance (and those for the C of E never look promising); others are suspicious of Diocesan initiatives that aim to 'double the number of young people', or other such hopes. It seems to be that we need to take on board the principals of the early church and avoid legalities; that way we have to keep relying on the Spirit.

So finally, where's the good news and where's the challenge?

Often the call to 'life in all its fullness' (John 10:10) begins with small steps. I wonder how God is calling us at this time towards more fulness? We can be encouraged by signs of growth: people standing up in public to affirm their faith in Christ, as we celebrated last week; more contact with parents in our café; openness to discussing the sermons; openness to employing a youth worker; prayer, giving, hospitality and volunteering, practiced by so many in this church. God has greatly blessed us with well stewarded financial resources – the call is perhaps to know how to make them bear as much fruit as possible.

May the public courage, generosity, proclamation, prayer and sacramental fellowship of the church of Acts, be ours in abundance, and may we know joy as God continues to lead us deeper into this abundant life, for the sake of his world. Amen.