

If our church community vanished tomorrow, would our villages say, We've lost a power for good in the community? Or would they only notice that the building was empty?

We're part of the way through a short series of talks under the title, "Our Church." Eliza launched the series with *Our Church: a community energised by God*. She helped show what it means for the church to be "Spirit-filled." She showed that the church is a community of people created and held together by God's Spirit, within and among whom God is active.

Last week, Jan in Chilton and Stephen in Harwell spoke on "Our Church: a 'nurturing community of friends.'" They helped to show from a range of Bible texts that "The church is a community that nourishes and supports those who come to it, drawing them closer to God by teaching, worship and example, and developing their potentiality for good."

The series concludes next week, when Marilyn and I, in Harwell and Chilton respectively, will look at *Our Church: a community for non-members*. We'll each show how "The church is a community that exists for those outside as much as for those within: it is open to all who want to love and be loved," building on my overarching theme that we must always work on becoming a place of welcome, a place where we don't just say come and join us, we say come and change us, as by the grace of God we look to grow in diversity, to celebrate difference, to work towards unity as we recognise that God has made us gloriously different.

We need a shared definition of what "church" even is. Our English word "church" traces its roots to *kyriakon*, "The Lord's House." But the word "church" we find in our Bibles usually translates a very different Greek word. That word is *ekklesia*. And its roots are deep in our heritage. In Greek translations of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the word *ekklesia* appears frequently, and it usually means the assembly of Israel, the gathering of the people called by God to serve Him, to worship Him alone and to receive the nations as, in time, the whole world might come to know the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be one true God of all creation.

So if the church is a gathering, and a church is the place where we gather, *why do we gather?* What should we expect?

I've been enjoying the book *Becoming God's Family* by Carmen Imes, and if you were here last Sunday you may have heard one quote. Here's another, this time from the introduction:

"We gather to seek God's presence. On our best days we recognise that we cannot manufacture this ourselves but must simply be ready to receive."

Today we explore how our *Ekklesia*, this gathered family, is designed to be a "Power for Good," both in our villages, everywhere we go and even across the globe.

Before the church *does* good, it must be *made* good by the power of Christ. In Isaiah chapter 61 we read,

61 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

You could say that this is core to the mission statement we share with all churches, all gatherings in Christ's name, throughout the world and in every age. Isaiah points us to the "good" there is for us to do: to "proclaim good news to the poor... To bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion – to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

We heard in our reading from Luke's Gospel how Jesus sends out the twelve apostles, those he has called and chosen to be with him as he teaches and heals, touches and welcomes, challenges and parties with the lost sheep of Israel and more besides. He sends them with power and authority. The "power for good" is a *delegated* power; it comes from Christ. It's not built on our own social agendas, and it's not dependent on our capabilities or commitment. It's from Christ and of Christ and with Christ, or else it's not the Good we are called to bring, however worthy our intentions, however skilled and experienced our community.

As Imes puts it,

"We could call the Church an incarnational community informed by the scriptures." It "bears embodied witness to Christ in a particular place." It is "An intercultural and intergenerational family around the communion table where we celebrate Christ's self-giving love, and in the trenches of daily life where we serve one another and our neighbours."

Earlier in Luke's Gospel, in Chapter 4 after he is tempted, Jesus returned to Galilee where he had grown up. He returned "in the Holy Spirit" and "on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him." The words Luke records are from Isaiah 61, where I read from just now.

After Jesus reads those beautiful words, words of healing and freedom, the atmosphere in the Nazareth synagogue is electric. At first, it's a 'hometown hero' moment. People are nodding; they are amazed. They think, *'This is great! God's power is here for us.'*

But then, Jesus does something uncomfortable. He reminds them that in the Old Testament, when there was a famine in Israel, God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow in *Zarephath*: to a foreigner. When there were many lepers in Israel, only Naaman the *Syrian* was healed.

And the turnaround is immediate. The very moment that Jesus suggests God's 'Power for Good' *isn't* a private treasure for the 'in-group' but a gift for the 'outsider,' the crowd turns. The same people who were cheering him moments ago are now trying to hurl him off a cliff.

This is the reality check for our mission today:

Goodness is Provocative: Being a 'Power for Good' in our parishes isn't about being nice. It's about a radical, self-giving love that crosses boundaries and goes beyond our comfort zone.

The Global Heart of God: Just as Jesus looked beyond the borders of Nazareth, our church, our *Ekklesia* is called to look beyond our own comfort.

The Trench Work: As Carmen Imes says, we are a family "in the trenches of daily life." Sometimes those trenches involve the hard work of loving the very people our society (or our own hearts) would rather exclude.

In Acts 2.44-47 we read,

⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

The early church didn't just preach; they didn't just pray; they didn't just worship. The early church shared. Their "goodness" was tangible. They met every need so that "there was no needy person among them." [Acts 4.34a]

How does this look in our parishes? It's in the "self-giving love" Carmen Imes mentions. It's the accountant acting with integrity. It's the parent raising children in grace. It's the neighbour checking on someone who is vulnerable or lonely or difficult.

Where does this lead? Acts chapter 2 tells about the very first Ekklesia of the new Way “⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

When the church is a power for good locally, it becomes *magnetic*. Even those who think we are completely deluded may appreciate the love and creativity, the kindness and patience we bring if we bring our faith to life “in the trenches.”

Acts shows waves of growth, waves of power for good growing and growing. “...more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number,” Acts 5.14 tells us. The healing power of the church spills out of the temple and into the streets, drawing people from towns *around* Jerusalem, and even a wave of persecution causes the wave to grow, as scattered believers form new assemblies, new Ekklesia, to the furthest points of the known world.

Today we know about more of the world, and the needs are very great. Through our mission links and our personal prayer and giving networks, we look to be a power for good in the wider world. And, as we do so, we remember that there is opposition

In his letter to the Ekklesia of Ephesus, Paul writes

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹²For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. [Ephesians 6.10-13]

If we try, even for a moment, to be a “power for good” as Christ calls us onward, we will be taking a spiritual stand against “the spiritual forces of evil.” We will face opposition. The more committed we are, the more we are likely to experience, and it will come from all directions. We must “put on the full armour of God,” and we must remember that we are not called to attack, but only “to stand your ground, and after [we] have done everything, to stand.”

When you pray for all the saints, when you pray that the gospel will be proclaimed boldly in word and deed alike, you are siding against darkness and with the “power for good” we gather in hope and expectation to find.

I asked you, “If our church community vanished tomorrow, would our villages say, We’ve lost a power for good in the community? Or would they only notice that the building was empty?”

Seeing through Isaiah’s eyes, fixing our eyes on Jesus and watching the new Ekklesia shown in Acts, we see that being *missed* certainly isn’t about being famous. It’s not even about being popular. It’s about being *essential*. It’s about the ‘intergenerational family’ Carmen Imes describes, where the lonely find a home. It’s about being a people so filled with the ‘self-giving love’ of Christ that our presence in the office, on the school run, on the bus, in the club and the shop and the pub, that our prayerful presence and willing hearts and hands become a source of light.

If we are ready to receive God’s presence as we are gathered here, we won’t just be the people who hang out at this historic building once or twice a week. We will be a power for good that our community, our nation and even our world will want to keep. If we wait on God, if we “*gather to seek God’s presence.*” and “*simply be ready to receive,*” then by the mysterious grace of God we will be the means by which our neighbours encounter the living God.

We are a **Family**: Intergenerational and multicultural, gathered around the table of Christ’s love. We are **Receivers**: We don’t manufacture the power or come up with our definition of what’s good; we receive it by seeking God’s presence. We are **Agents**: In our parish, we are the hands of Christ; in the nation and world, we are his ambassadors and the warriors who stand up for the poor and broken in the strength of Christ alone.

Remember this: we are the **Ekklesia**. We are the *assembly* called out for the benefit of those still outside. Let us go into the trenches of this week, ready to be a power for good. Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for calling us as your Ekklesia, not just to gather within these walls, but to be sent out as your agents of grace.

Lord, we confess that we cannot manufacture the power to change hearts or heal our land on our own. So, we stand ready to receive. Fill us again with the Spirit of Isaiah 61, that we might go into our parish with good news for the broken-hearted and comfort for those who mourn.

As we move from the communion table into the 'trenches' of our daily lives, help us to be an intercultural and intergenerational family that looks out for one another. Grant us the courage to wear your armour, the belt of truth and the shoes of peace, as we work for the good of our nation and the healing of the world.

May our work in our offices, our schools, and our neighbourhoods be a witness to your self-giving love. Make us a power for good that cannot be ignored, to the glory of your name and the growth of your Kingdom. Amen..

Bible Readings

[Luke 9.1-9](#)

Jesus sends out the Twelve

9 When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, ²and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal those who were ill. ³He told them: 'Take nothing for the journey – no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt. ⁴Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. ⁵If people do not welcome you, leave their town and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.' ⁶So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news and healing people everywhere.

⁷Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, ⁸others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. ⁹But Herod said, 'I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about?' And he tried to see him.

[Acts 5.12-16](#)

The apostles heal many

¹²The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. ¹³No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. ¹⁴Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. ¹⁵As a result, people brought those who were ill into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that

at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. ¹⁶Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing those who were ill and those tormented by impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

[Ref Isaiah 61.1-3](#)

The year of the Lord's favour

61 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]

²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,

³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,

the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendour.

Footnotes

- a. [Isaiah 61:1](#) Hebrew; Septuagint *the blind*

Ref Ephesians 6.10-20

The armour of God

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled round your waist, with the breastplate of

righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Sermon Series: "Our Church"

Date	Preacher	Title	Suggested Readings
25 January	Eliza (C)	Our Church: a community energised by God	Acts 2.1-21 (incorporates Old Testament reading) 1 Corinthians 12.1, 4-11
1st February	Jan (C); Stephen L (H)	Our Church: a 'nurturing community of friends'	Matthew 18 15-20 Ephesians 4.1-16
8th February	Jeremy (H)	Our Church: a power for good	Luke 9 1-9 Acts 5.12-16
15th February	Jeremy (C); Marilyn (H)	Our Church: a community for non-members	Ephesians 2.11-22 Mark 2 13-17

Title	Notes & relevant passages
Our Church: a community energised by God	Spirit-filled: The church is a community of people created and held together by God's Spirit, within and among whom God is active. Acts 4.31
Our Church: a 'nurturing community of friends'	Nurturing: The church is a community that nourishes and supports those who come to it, drawing them closer to God by teaching, worship and example, and developing their potentiality for good. Exodus 13.2-10 Deuteronomy 6.4-25; Psalms 42-43, 84, 122; Matthew 18.15-20; Acts 6.1-7; Hebrews 10.23-25
Our Church: a power for good	Powerful -1: The church is God's agent, acting for good in our parish and wherever its members live and work. Isaiah 61.1-3; Acts 2.44-47 Powerful -2: The church is God's agent, acting for good in the nation, Europe and the world. Ephesians 6.10-20
Our Church: a community for non-members	Accessible: The church is a community that exists for those outside as much as for those within: it is open to all who want to love and be loved. Matthew 9.35-38; Acts 11.1-18