

Spirit and Community

Readings: Acts 2: 14-21 and Acts 2: 42-47

Good morning/evening

It's good to be worshipping with you again and continuing with our overview of the Bible. Today we are going to be thinking about the Holy Spirit and the community of believers as described in the Book of Acts.

Over the last few weeks we have been considering some big themes from the Bible and how they fit into the over-arching story of God's everlasting love and his saving acts of mercy for those he created. Firstly, Eliza helped us to think about our origins and desire for meaning in life as we studied Genesis. The following week Jan led us through the story of the Exodus from Egypt and the human quest for freedom. We ended the Old Testament studies with Alex explaining the theme of exile and the human cry for peace as told through the books of Joshua and Judges, Kings and some of the prophets.

Last week we moved into the New Testament as Kate told us of the Messiah and the human need for love as we considered the Gospels. Next week we will end our studies of the New Testament as Jonathan leads us in the theme of Hope and the human longing for home, focussing on the book of Revelation. This week we will be concentrating on the Holy Spirit and the human thirst for community as told through the book of Acts and some of Paul's letters to the early churches.

The book of Acts was written by Luke who also wrote the third gospel. Luke's gospel gives a rich account of the life and ministry of Jesus and ends with him ascending to glory in heaven. Acts, or the Acts of the Apostles to give it its full name, is the second volume of his account and it tells how Jesus' followers continued his mission.

Before Jesus died, he promised his followers that they would not be left alone but that he would give them 'another counsellor'. This was the Holy Spirit which would be poured out on them enabling them to take forward Jesus' mission. Jesus was and is ruling from heaven but through his Holy Spirit he is with his followers on earth.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on many of Jesus' followers as they gathered to celebrate Pentecost, the festival of harvest. We celebrated Pentecost a few weeks ago and heard the account of the Holy Spirit coming upon crowds of people in Jerusalem in the form of wind and fire. The Holy Spirit had existed since before creation when the Spirit hovered over the chaos. God breathed his Spirit into creation, including humans, giving us life. And now, God was breathing new life into his people through the Holy Spirit.

As the Holy Spirit came upon the gathering in Jerusalem tongues of fire were also seen over the heads of the people. The Jewish people gathered in Jerusalem would have been familiar with the image of powerful fire described in the scriptures. Think of Moses looking in awe at the burning bush and hearing God speaking to him. Think of Elijah calling down fire at Mount Carmel, challenging and overcoming the power of evil.

The Holy Spirit continued to be present throughout the Old Testament, but given only to a few individuals such as King David. The Spirit also dwelt in the tabernacle in the desert and later in the Temple in Jerusalem, reminding worshippers of the presence and glory of God. Now, at Pentecost, the Spirit was being poured out on God's people who themselves became temples of the Spirit. What a merciful and great God who has gifted his imperfect people with the perfection of the Spirit. We too, when we believe and trust in Jesus, are given the Holy Spirit who works within us and amongst us, empowering us to serve.

On that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the apostle Peter called on the people to repent, to turn around from their wrongdoing, to be baptized as a sign of a new start in life and a sign of membership of a new community of believers. We heard in our first reading from Acts how God had promised through the prophet Joel that ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’. And people were saved that day as they repented and about three thousand people were added to the community of believers.

That new community of believers was the nucleus of the church which grew across the world from that day on. Let’s think again about this new community as described in our second reading today. How did this community differ from any other? Well, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship. They considered it of crucial importance to study God’s word and to study it together. They prayed together and they shared in the breaking of bread – the very act of worship which Jesus had commanded his disciples to continue in remembrance of him. Signs and wonders were performed by the apostles; the believers shared their possessions and made sure no-one was in need; they met corporately and publicly in the temple courts and shared meals together in their homes. They rejoiced together and God blessed them by adding to their numbers daily.

What a wonderful example of community! What a great model for us as the modern-day church to follow. Of course, they were flawed people like we are but they followed God’s word and were empowered by his Spirit and God blessed them. And he blesses us when we follow the example of the early church. We are not designed to live alone or to serve God alone. We are called to be part of a community of believers who serve one another and the wider world through the power of the Spirit.

Modern society has become very fragmented with much emphasis on the individual and on personal rights. But the fact is that we need

each other. Haven't these last months of covid restrictions taught us this? As we move out of these restrictions and are able to worship and meet in numbers again, let's follow this example of the early church very closely in our prayer and worship, our breaking of bread, our giving to one another and the needy, our hospitality and in our joy at all that God has done for us.

There is a beautiful image of community given in nature through the Sequoia tree. It is the largest and oldest tree in the world, growing to 80 metres in height and living up to 3,000 years. The secret of its strength is its root system because the roots are intertwined. Each part is made secure by the others. This is true community. Mutual support allowing for mutual flourishing.

Of course, the early church had its problems – its members were human after all! The book of Acts and the letters of Paul and others that follow, don't dress this up but gives the gory details of squabbles, division, abuse of power and so on.

The early church didn't stay in Jerusalem, but spread, largely as a result of persecution. The Roman and Jewish authorities were threatened by this new phenomenon and sought to destroy it. But persecution led to the growth of the church as it spread across countries and cultures. Following the murder of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, many Christians were scattered. But they shared the good news of Jesus with the new people they met. Philip found himself explaining the Bible to an Ethiopian official who believed and was baptized and went on his way rejoicing. Peter, a Jew, was challenged at the home of Cornelius, a Roman Gentile, to realize that nothing that God had made was impure. From its Jewish beginnings, the church grew and spread into the Gentile world.

Paul later wrote in his letter to the Galatians that 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

I say that Paul wrote this later because originally he had been an ardent opponent of the early church and sought to destroy it. He was a well-educated Jew and a Pharisee, known then as Saul, and he hated the new community of Christians. Whilst out on a mission to round up Christians in Damascus his plan was thwarted when Jesus met him on the road. Blinded by the light of Jesus' presence, Saul fell from his horse and heard the voice of Jesus speaking. Saul realized that it was Jesus himself he was persecuting. From that moment he repented. Through the gracious ministry of a man in Damascus named Ananias, Saul's sight was restored, he turned to follow Jesus and then began to preach the gospel he had once hated. He became a great Christian leader, teacher and church planter and, through his ministry and that of the other apostles, the church grew throughout Asia, Turkey, Greece and into Italy.

The Christian community is now worldwide and we are welcomed to be part of it and to serve God through it. We can continue to worship and serve together, studying God's word and listening to him as we try to discern his heartbeat for the world. We are called to live God's way rather than following the popular culture and to align ourselves with the Holy Spirit, serve together in the community of believers, and take Christ's mission forward.

As we start to meet together in greater numbers, will you be part of that community of believers? We are all welcome and we are all needed.

Amen.