

The church is born: breaking of bread Acts 2: 42-47 Luke 22: 7-20

Welcome to the 3rd in our series of sermons about the early church. And thank you Bob for putting the pictures on the screen. I'll explain what they are and why they're there in a minute.

One of the most amazing things about the Church in the book of Acts is the speed at which it grew. There are lots of reasons why we might want the church to grow today, but I think the most important is that we love God and know it gladdens his heart when people turn to him. And we do believe that we have good news that our family and friends, colleagues and neighbours need to hear, whether they recognise that or not. So what did the church in Acts do, and what does it mean for us?

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

2 weeks ago Simon talked about the apostles' teaching + last week Stuart talked about fellowship. If you missed those, do go back and listen on youtube. They're still there.

Today we come to the believers devoting themselves to the breaking of bread.

My first question was, is this talking about communion or about sharing meals together? But actually I think that rather misses the point.

The reading from Luke talks about Jesus giving thanks for wine and then for bread in the context of the Passover supper, the annual feast when the Jews remember how God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. Paul, writing his first letter to the Corinthians less than 25 years after that first supper, records Jesus' words at the sharing of the cup like this: 'do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me'.

Paul is expecting that the Christians would be meeting together regularly to eat and drink and to share bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus.

So in the original context the first Christians were both sharing a meal and making a memorial of Jesus' death. It's all rather different from what we do today.

But I think there are some really important general principles behind the breaking of bread that we can apply to our lives here and now.

I'm going to focus on three themes, one for each picture, and then end by talking about how we might respond to them in the light of Covid19.

Firstly we break bread and share wine in remembrance of Jesus. That's why my first picture is a chalice and a paten. And if you look closely they have a Celtic cross on them to remind us that communion is all about the cross.

Paul, again in 1 Corinthians 11, says 'Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes'.

At every Communion service we remember Jesus' offering of his body and his blood for us on the cross, his bearing of the punishment we deserved that we might have eternal life.

The priest acts out what Jesus did and reminds us of his words This is my body given for you.....

Communion is a sacrament: an outward sign of an invisible grace.

We share one bread and one cup to remind ourselves that we are one body, the body of Christ here on earth. It's a non-verbal, kinaesthetic way of remembering. It should be inclusive, involving those who struggle with long words and abstract ideas.

It should strengthen the faith of believers and proclaim that faith to those who don't yet believe. It should help all of us love God more.

Secondly eating together is a really important way of enjoying fellowship together and expressing care for each other.

My second picture is of a community lunch my old church in Blandford used to run. When we invite someone for a meal, when they are in our home, or our church hall, we try to make sure that their needs for shelter and safety and warmth and food are met. At our lunches that included entertaining their children.

Breaking bread together in the sense of sharing meals together makes us attentive to each others' needs and helps us to love each other more. Jesus chose to place the commemoration of his death in the context of eating together. Might that be because he wants us to use the new life he offers us to care for one another?

My third picture is a painting by Rembrandt of the Ascension.

That Jesus placed food at the very centre of the church's life together is a hallowing of our physical bodies and their needs.

In Jesus, God was made human and shared a body like ours. Since the Ascension a human body - Jesus' risen body, a real human body that Thomas could touch and that could eat fish - is now in heaven, seated at the right hand of God who is pure spirit.

And our bodies are called to be temples of the Holy Spirit.

We need to respect our bodies, nourish and care for them, so that we, living in them, can love God and love our neighbours as ourselves.

In this time of pandemic some of our congregation can't attend church. Sharing food with others is complex and hedged around with rules, and real risks. How do we respond?

Honesty is important, acknowledging what we find hard, sharing the way we feel with others, so that we, and they, know we are not alone.

It is a time to lament, to show that we value what we are missing.

It is a time to think of new ways to express our care of one another, and particularly of those who can't get to church. Perhaps we can't have our friends round for a meal, but can we phone them, or call on them for a

quick doorstep chat on our way to the shops? To share news and pray for each other. To show someone how to find a youtube service or how to log on to zoom on a phone. To offer to shop or collect prescriptions for an elderly neighbour.

It is a time to remember that we are human and to look after our bodily needs. That will mean something different for each of us: it might be taking time to go out for fresh air and exercise or bothering to cook sensible food. It may be as simple as recognising that we are finding prayer hard because we are tired or ill or deprived of human company, rather than because God has changed or is no longer in control.

And it is a time to hope. To remember that God never tests us beyond what we can bear but will equip us for what he is calling us to do.

It is a time to hope and to pray that God will use these extraordinary times to draw people back to himself. That when it is all over, when we reach the new normal, people will flock to our churches, attracted by the love, care and joy they see in the lives of ordinary Christians like us.

But above all we hope because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Because death is defeated and one day we will sit down at the heavenly feast of which this communion we share this morning is only a pale foreshadowing.

So let's remember Jesus and his death for us. Let's care for one another and let's not forget that we are real embodied human beings. Most of all let us be a people of hope.