

4th Sunday of Easter 2020

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. 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. (Acts 2: 42-47)

The reading from Acts which is set for today is often regarded as setting the model for the Christian Church. After they'd received the gift of the Spirit that Jesus had promised, the disciples took themselves out of the locked room to tell the world about the Messiah that they'd been following. They were turning out to be good speakers. People were listening to them so they were able to share what they'd learnt from Jesus. They found that they had a gift for healing were publicly exercising that gift, bringing about miraculous cures. So people gathered around them, and, as people do, they formed a group. They made commitments. They believed in the teachings of the apostles and they saw themselves as a community. So in this passage we read of how that community held itself together.

If we think about it, the pattern hasn't changed much since then. It's all there in the first verse of this passage, four key activities on which the life of the community was based. If we consider what today's church does then it's all fairly similar. There's the apostles' teaching. Every Sunday in our services we hear that teaching being read. We may then spend time thinking about it, maybe as a result of a sermon or a discussion group but it's still the apostles' teaching. We come together fellowship, whether it's in our church services or in puddings and quiz nights. We break bread together, formally at communion as well as in our shared meals and coffee mornings. Alongside all of this we have times of prayer, in the liturgy and in our personal lives.

As we reflect on those four activities, we can realise that even in this time of social distancing we don't have to stop being church. Our building may be locked but our Bibles aren't. We might even have a bit more time at the moment to read and meditate on the teachings of the apostles. Our fellowship continues. The telephone has come back into its own and we can interact face to face online. To think that being able to see the person you're talking to was in the realm of James Bond films when I was young! While the breaking of bread is not something we can do in community at the moment, our meal times might be a time when we make a point of remembering those who aren't able to be with us, remembering also that the risen Jesus is with us, every step of the way. Then there is prayer. I don't think we've ever in my lifetime felt more of a need to pray than we do now. So we pray.

All of that though begs the question of how will church look when this time of social distancing is over. Will we still need to maintain our places of worship or will we have drifted into joining together in prayer and praise through live streaming or the BBC's excellent services? As we read further into the passage though we find that the new Christians continued to meet in the temple. The House of God remained as a focus for their times of worship even though they were experiencing their faith in different ways. We read too that others joined them, perhaps because of their presence in a public place.

So maybe what we now have to think about is what exactly does our church building mean for us as worshipping community. If it is a place where the presence of God can be made real then I think it will not be usurped by online worship but will remain to welcome even more followers to share the joy of the risen Christ. Amen