

'Disciples...don't go to church!'

Text: Acts 2.42-47

I was walking along the Promenade by the beach at Weymouth on holiday one day when someone came towards me wearing a T shirt saying, 'Don't go to church'. 'Interesting', I thought... 'it's a different take on those dinosaur car badges with Darwin at the bottom... the atheist's alternative to fish badges proclaiming Jesus.' Then I looked back and saw that the T shirt's rear-view message was much more positive. It exhorted everyone to 'Be the church!'. The T shirt was, in a small way, acting as a bit of 'beach mission' – pointing to and reminding people about God in the middle of their daily lives...in this case, on a hot sunny day by the sea.

At the beginning of the Lockdown the Archbishop of Canterbury and all the Bishops of the Church of England were saying 'We're going to close our churches: but that doesn't mean the church is going to shut up shop. We are going to be church in a different way. This will be an opportunity for us to serve our communities and to 'be church' in a different way.'

And so it is proving. We ourselves are settling into a pattern where we don't 'go to church'...but we gather, we make community, we create 'church' within the confines of our houses - yes, separated by distance...but sometimes it feels also, we've drawn closer too. And, very clearly for some of us, 'being church' is also very practical and mundane. It means asking people what they need from the shops and from the chemist...and sometimes waiting for considerable times in a queue in order to get it.

Interestingly, when you read the Acts of the Apostles, you never hear of those first disciples 'going to church'. In today's reading, describing the first days of the Christian community, they are still going to the Jewish Temple. Later on, in Acts, members of the new Christian community gather outside a town or inside a house. Then as now, sermons could go on too long: Luke describes how, gathering in a house to worship, Paul preached for so long, a young man went to sleep and fell out of a window! No – those first disciples never went to church...but they certainly were 'the church'. And their example is what we are being invited to follow in our time today.

Each of us will have different pictures of people 'being' rather than 'going to' church in the current lockdown. Already lessons the future are beginning to emerge. I took part in a Zoom Clergy Chapter meeting on Wednesday, attended by all the ordained ministers in our Bristol West Deanery. One of the first things we agreed was that the way we, as 'church', sought to communicate with our communities and the wider world was, now, absolutely crucial. Every means of communication at our disposal had to be up to date and used as effectively as possible. Above all, this means keeping our website and Facebook pages clear and attractive – inviting and enabling people to learn more once they make initial contact.

Paul Langham, the Vicar of Christchurch, Clifton, said that he thought of church websites as being the equivalent of sycamore trees in Jesus' day. There are lots of curious, Zaccheus-like people in our communities, he thought, who don't dare come to church but are intrigued and want to know more about God revealed in Jesus: so, Paul suggested, we should think of our websites, Facebook pages and all forms of digital communication, which are accessible to people both locally and all over the world, as sycamore trees. How many Zaccheus-like people are out there, he wondered, now able to climb up and, above and through us, see Jesus more clearly? He said someone had come to faith through the online ministry of Christchurch without stepping into the church at all.

And Simon Potter, a priest on the staff of St Mary's Stoke Bishop, said that he was getting feedback of their ministry reaching into homes and being explored by people in gated properties in their parish, when those same people would not have thought of bothering to go to church.

In this same vein, I can report to you that I spent an afternoon this week updating St Peter's appearance on the Church of England's national 'aChurchNearYou' website. Before I started I was amazed to discover that over 200 people had logged on to our page in the past month. The thought of that many people taking an interest in and potentially becoming part of St Peter's spurred me on considerably! When I checked the figures on Thursday afternoon, I learned that 88 people had visited the page in just the last week. The importance of making our digital presence up to date and attractive is surely a lesson for us to learn and apply from this day onwards.

Like the word 'church', websites don't get mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles either! What is provided in our reading this morning is a picture of the Christian community in an ideal phase of its life. The verse before our reading records 3000 people being added to the community on the day of Pentecost. And our text goes on 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers'. But they weren't just holy and pious: they were community minded and practical too. They shared their resources 'as each had need' ...just as we are trying to do today.

How long can this be kept up? That's an interesting question. We've been doing it for coming up to 7 weeks now. Surely we can do it for 7 more. It may indeed be that we will need to respond to aspects of self-isolating and social distancing for some 7 x 7 weeks and more. It's clear from what Luke writes after Acts 2 – especially in the account in Acts 5 of Ananias and Sapphira withholding money when invited to share – that those first didn't always get it right either. But, just as Luke is at pains to cast all the action in the Acts of the Apostles as being undertaken under the sovereignty of God and God's Spirit poured out, as the prophet Joel foresaw, upon all people, no matter what their age or status, so, we should take heart, that same Spirit is at work in, around and through us.

Do you want evidence of this? Let me end with something our Area Dean told us at that Chapter meeting on Wednesday. Reflecting on how finances are being affected by the current virus situation, one or two people had quietly said to him 'Since they were spending less money now than had been the case, they would be increasing their giving to the church by that amount.'

As Luke wrote, the disciples 'would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds, as any had need.' Take heart: that same Spirit that fell on people and was so powerful in the days of the first Pentecost is at work in similar but different ways today. Remember: we may not be going to church – but, just like those first disciples, we can 'be church', wherever we are.