

THE BIG PICTURE ON A MISSION

What does the word 'Church' mean to you? There are at least four different ways of understanding it: 1)the building is probably the first thing that most people would think of when hear the word; the community has a 'church', meaning the building that sits beside Lanark Rd and it floodlit at night in the winter time, the building in which to get married and so on. 2)the denomination, meaning 'the Church of Scotland' as an institution, organisation, an important part of Scottish society and culture, part of the fabric of our society for generations and we would miss it if it wasn't there, even if we would not take an active part in its life. 3)the clergy: this is more of an English way of speaking and perhaps a more old-fashioned way of speaking, but it has been said of people who sensed a call from God to ministry that they 'went into the Church!' 4)the people: there has been a rediscovery of the people as the Church; we are the Church, the people of God, loved by God, called to be disciples of Jesus and called to bear witness to Jesus in the world.

The last of these is the New Testament's understanding of Church. In the first century, there were no Church buildings; the early Christians met in the Temple and in one another's homes, and sometimes also in secret places for fear of persecution and they left their mark in these secret meeting places as we said earlier. There was no organisation of the Church and no structures, it was not an institution; that came later, as did organised kind of leadership, perhaps necessary for the longevity of the Church. The most powerful sense of the Church in the New Testament is as the people of God, a people whom God loved, people whose lives are centred on Jesus, people who live by faith. Much of the New Testament is the story of the Church: Acts tells the story of this people; it picks out the stories of the leaders through whom God built up His Church; the letters of Paul and others are all designed to build up the Church, to nurture this people in their faith and life.

The story of our 8-week journey through the whole Bible so far is this: God made the world and everything in it and it was good, but sin entered and ever since we've lived in the tension of this good world/bad world. We have seen people live by faith; but we have also seen how the people of God lost their way and forgot to love God and marginalised Him and His commands. From the start, God has this great plan to bless the world, to bless all nations; it began with Abraham and has continued and it came to its climax in the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God made man for us; He came to teach, to heal, and to show compassion and kindness on weak and vulnerable people. Most of all, Jesus came to die on the cross; the reason for His coming was to lay down His life for us; on the third day God raised Him from the dead to live forever and because He died and was raised, these promises that Jesus made to bless the world all over again are sure and certain promises.

The story of Jesus ends with two things that seem not to work together. First of all, Jesus leaves His disciples with a task: "*Go and make...*" (Mt 28:19f) It is called 'The Great Commission'; the task that Jesus gave His disciples is to go and tell other people about Him so that they will become Christians too, so that they will become disciples. Put alongside that another picture of these disciples: "*On the...*" (Jn 20:19) They were a frightened group of people, hiding away because they were afraid; they were confused, not sure what to believe, so Peter and the others went fishing; they were not sure what to do next. They are hardly material for the task of telling others; they weren't sure what

to believe for themselves never mind tell and persuade others of their faith. Jesus told them “*Stay in...*” (Lk 24:49b)

What happened next? Do you ever watch *A Question of Sport* on television? I know some of you hate sport! Sometimes there is a round in the quiz called ‘what happened next?’ A piece of film is stopped at a key moment and the teams have to work out what happened next. It used to be a free for all; the teams had to make the answer up and it could get amazingly fanciful, often involving a dog running on to the pitch. Now they are given three options and have to choose which they prefer as the answer. So in the story of Jesus and God’s plan to bless the world, we have this challenge from Jesus, we have the disciples frightened and we have Jesus promise to clothe them with “*power...*” So what happened next?

Today is the day of Pentecost and this is just a brilliant coming together (unplanned) of this story for today because Pentecost is so significant in the life of the Church. It is three things: firstly, it is Jesus keeping His promise; then, it is Spirit being poured out on the friends of Jesus; thirdly, it is power for the disciples to be the people that Jesus wanted them to be. 50 days after Easter, another great feast takes place in Jerusalem and so people from all over the Jewish/Roman world are in the city. The disciples “*Were all...*” (Acts 2:1-3) Wind symbolised power; fire symbolised the purity and holiness of God; the tongues in which people from all over the world heard the disciples tell the stories of Jesus in their native languages symbolised that the gospel is for the whole world. The promise that God had made over and over again, through Ezekiel and other prophets to pour out the Spirit, through Jesus to give His Spirit to His people – that promise has been fulfilled and the Spirit lives in every believer.

The transformation is remarkable. Peter is one of these frightened and confused disciples; he leads the way back to the fishing because he’s not sure what to do next. Yet see him on the day of Pentecost! This is the same Peter: “*Men of...*” (2:22) and he goes on to tell his audience all about Jesus; he tells them that Jesus died and was raised; he tells them that this is the climax of God’s plans and promises for generations; he tells them that he and his friends are witnesses of all that God has done in and through Jesus; then he tells them that they need to come to God with repentance and faith in Jesus and that the promises of God are for everyone to receive for that faith. Some 3000 people believed Peter’s sermon and came to faith in Jesus that day! The power of the Spirit turned Peter from a confused, frightened man, into someone willing to stand up in public for his faith and tell people what he believed.

So began a story that has not yet ended! There are stories of people travelling across the world telling the stories of Jesus; Paul, the persecutor of the Church who was converted on the road to Damascus becoming the great messenger of the gospel, travelling to almost every city in the Greek and Roman world telling people about Jesus. There are stories of people coming to faith and beginning to live out that faith in an often hostile world. There are stories of the Church wrestling with huge dilemmas: who is the gospel for? How does the gospel change the way we think? How should we live? There are stories of new Churches, people coming together in their city or their town to worship God together and support one another as Christians. Most of the New Testament is made up of letters that Paul and others wrote to these new, young churches, or to their leaders, to nurture Christians in their faith, to pray for them, to help them know what to believe when they were confused, to help them know how to live their lives as Christians, and to help them deal with problems that arose in these new churches,

people wrestling with their new faith, what to believe, and with how to live. Through all of that God is at work to build His Church, His people who will worship and serve Him.

There are probably 20 things that I could say about the Church from the story of Acts and the letters; here are just a few:

1) The Story goes on: our story as a Church here in Juniper Green in 2011 goes all the way back to Pentecost in an unbroken line. We are part of the story that began that day with the Spirit being poured out and Peter preaching his sermon. Those whom Pet told, told someone else, who told another person and so on and down the generations that story has been passed on and on till Ninian and Columba brought the gospel to Scotland and our ancestors heard it and believed and 1600 years later, we are part of that story. There have been lots of twists and turns in that story to get us here, and some blind alleys, but God's Spirit is still at work, drawing people to Jesus, inspiring people to serve Jesus and equipping people to tell the story of Jesus to a new generation. The story goes on and will still go on.

2) The Church is people: it is worth saying that over and over again. We are the Church. This building called a Church because it is the place where the Church meets; the church not an institution; the clergy is not the Church; we are the Church; the Church is the people of God. We are a people loved by God, blessed by God in Jesus, called by Jesus to live a life of faith and discipleship. Our calendar of events is all about occasions and opportunities for the people of God to be together: to come together for worship, to pray together, to have conversations together about the Bible and how to understand it; to socialise together, to walk together, to eat together and so on; all so that we can nurture our relationship with God and relationships with one another.

3) Jesus is at the centre: there are two pictures in today's hymns that seem to contradict one another: Jesus the King and Head of the Church and Jesus as the foundation of the Church; one at the top, one at the bottom. Both are pictures of Jesus at the centre of the Church, as crucial to the Church. The 'King and Head of the Church' tells us that ultimately the Church belongs to Jesus; He is the One we follow; we obey Him, we serve Him; ultimately the Church is His, not ours and so we face the constant challenge of being the people, the Church, that Jesus wants us to be. The 'Foundation' tells us that Jesus gives the Church our life; He is the one in whom we trust and on whom we depend for life, peace, grace and salvation and He gives us all of these things in abundance; He lavishes His love upon us. Jesus stands at the centre and His Spirit lives in us.

4) We are people on a mission: God's great plan to bless the world goes on; it is still there, He is still working out His plan; He is still pouring out His love and blessing into the hearts and minds of people all over the world, in our community and to the ends of the earth. Our challenge is to be His partners, to co-workers in His mission. The challenge we face is to tell people about Jesus, is to share our faith, to tell others the stories of Jesus and why they matter; to show people Jesus by the way that we live, by our love, our service, our lifestyle, letting the world see what Jesus is like by the way we live. This is our God-given mission and as we tell people about Him and show people Jesus, God is at work to draw people to Jesus and faith in Him.

"You are..." (1 Pet 2:9f) This is who we are, a people belonging to God, a people who are loved and blessed, a people on whom God has lavished His love and grace; a people called and challenged to declare His praises in worship and in mission. This is

12th June 2011

the wonderfully exciting story of a people whom we call 'the Church', we are a part of this, we share in the story. The same Spirit lives in us; the same Jesus is the heart of our faith; the same God has blessed us. The story goes on!