

Acts 4:18-36

Even from a very early age I've always been fascinated by the book of acts. I can still picture it, as though it were yesterday, in RE lessons at school, while everyone else was messing about, I was enthusiastically studying Luke's account of life in the early church and being intrigued by all that happened. This prompted one of my classmates Steven Patrick to shout across the room, what are you going to be Stevo when you grow up? A Vicar? I'm sure he cannot remember making that comment and would be shocked after all these years to discover that he was a prophet!

As part on my regular, daily, bible reading plan, once again, I'm currently reading the book of acts. I have to admit that I'm thoroughly enjoying it and gaining fresh insights. Luke paints such an amazing picture of a very vibrant church. That said, we should never overlook the fact that life was far from easy for them, back then.

There is so much that we can learn from studying Acts, to help us as we seek to be God's ambassadors today, in an increasingly hostile society. I know we've done a summer series on Acts in the recent past, so I'm not planning on repeating that again this year. However, there's just a couple of passages which have really spoken to me which I am planning to share with you over the next few weeks, because they are relevant for us in St Mary's and tie in with the themes of our renewed Diocesan vision.

This morning's reading clearly shows some of the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit. In particular, I want to remind us of five distinguishing marks of the early church:-

Firstly, boldness. Peter and John were in a tight spot. They had been arrested and told, in no uncertain terms, to stop preaching in the name of

Jesus. But they were having none of it. They chose to obey God rather than the threats of the religious leaders.

Instead, they turned to prayer. Notice how they prayed. They did not pray with a selfish motivation; they did not ask for a quiet life, nor did they ask for protection from their enemies. Perhaps surprisingly, they did not even pray that those who were opposing them would come to faith in Jesus. Instead, they prayed for boldness to continue telling everyone about Jesus. As a result of this impromptu prayer meeting, the place where they were meeting, was shaken and they were once again **all** filled with the Holy Spirit, so that they continued speak the word of God boldly.

Wow, that must have been some prayer meeting! I'm sure that no-one nodded off during it. It serves as an important reminder that we all need to continue to daily pray for that fresh empowering of the holy spirit to enable us to make the most of every opportunity to share our faith.

Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage says, the church needs to learn in every generation what it means to pray with confidence like this, it needs again and again that sense of God's powerful presence shaking us up, blowing away the cobwebs, filling us with the Holy Spirit and giving us that same boldness.

Secondly, power. They asked God, to stretch out his hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. And guess what, their prayer was answered, for we read in verse 33, with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Signs and wonders that confirm the message we have been sharing is perhaps the one thing that has been missing in large sections of the church, certainly in the West in recent times. We can tell people time and time again the good news of Jesus love for them but there's nothing that is going to convince them that it really is true more than God showing in power, doing something to prove his love, so that they experience his presence for themselves, first hand.

Are we bold enough to pray the prayer the disciples prayed, and ask for signs and wonders to confirm the message we have to share?

Then there are two intriguing, almost throw away lines that it is easy to overlook but sum up neatly what life in the early church was like:

Thirdly, unity. Vs 32 all the believers were one in heart and mind. To understand this phrase, you have to look a bit wider and include other similar passages, but it clearly does not mean is they didn't have disputes. Later in his account clearly, they initially struggled to accept that the gentiles had been included into the church. Luke has already told us in chapter 2 that they met together daily in each other's houses, worshipping and breaking bread together.

I've always been a firm believer in the importance of unity within the church. It is such a privilege to be chair of the churches together group in Eastwood and encouraging that we all work together so well.

And fourthly, grace (v 33b). And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all .

What a beautiful phrase Luke uses to describe the church, but I really struggled to understand what it means. The best that I can come up with is

that they enjoyed a period our favour in God's eyes and the favour of all the people. You could say that they enjoyed a period of both numerical and spiritual growth.

And finally, Generosity.

No one told Joseph, who was also called Barnabas, to sell his field and give the money to the disciples. He simply saw the need and felt compelled by the Holy spirit to do something to help resolve the issue.

When we fully appreciate and experience God's Radical, unmerited, extravagant love for us, and we become aware of the need, then there is only one possible response, that is we are generous with all that God has given to us.

We've been doing some work preparing for a meeting on the 17th of July with the Diocese where they are helping parishes review their finances and plan for the future. It's very clear that here at St Mary's we have good number of very generous people, who regularly and sacrificially give to God's work. I'd like to take this opportunity to say a very big thank you to you all. Your generosity has meant that every year we have paid our parish share in full. If you don't know what parish share is, this is the money we pay to the diocese, that covers that cost of providing ministry: clergy pay, housing, pensions, training etc.

However, as a church we have work that needs doing. We imminently need to replace the two boilers that heat the church, we also need to replace the floor covering in the parish room. Last year for the first time while I have been vicar, we had a deficit of income and had to use some of our reserves to cover costs. Current income just about covers running costs but doesn't give

us any room for manoeuvre and pay for the important repairs that have to be made.

Please can I ask you all to prayerfully consider your response to this. When was the last time you reviewed how much you give to the life of the church? Could you give £5 a month extra? That's less than the price of a cup of coffee per week, some of you may be able to give more. Perhaps there are some people who regularly watch our services online who could make a financial contribution. One of the easiest ways that you can do this is by scanning the QR code.

If everybody was able to make a small increase to their giving, then it would make a significant difference, and we would be able carried out the repairs that are needed without having to dig into our limited reserves again. Eastwood people have a reputation for being very generous, let's make sure that we continue to excel in this important area of our discipleship.