**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**May 3rd - The 4th Sunday after Easter**

**‘A vision. *The* vision? Our vision?’ (Acts 2:42-47)**

*Dear Friends,*

*I hope you’re all doing OK. I’ve seen it reported, at the end of this, our sixth week of isolation that - in common with timings in other countries that have gone into extended lockdown - many people have been finding the conditions under which we’re now living increasingly difficult over the past few days.*

*It’s very much my prayer that this doesn’t apply to you, but, if you are particularly struggling with being isolated, whether practically, emotionally or spiritually, please get in touch with me (my contact details are below), and I’ll do my best to support you.*

*As you’ll read - or hear, if you listen to the podcast as opposed to read the sermon transcript! – preparing this week’s sermon has led me to reflect on some ways in which we are (or aren’t!) ‘being church’ at the moment. So, especially with the Thy Kingdom Come prayer initiative at the end of this month, do look out for new ways in which we’re going to be together - albeit virtually - over the coming weeks.*

*With love and prayers, and God bless.*



**Rev. Tim Chambers
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Alleluia! Christ Is Risen! **He Is Risen indeed!
Alleluia!**

**The Collect for the 3rd Sunday after Easter
(Common Worship)**

Risen Christ,
faithful shepherd of your Father’s sheep:
teach us to hear your voice
and to follow your command,
that all your people may be gathered into one flock,
to the glory of God the Father.
**Amen.**

**Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You**

**Played by Deb Hubbard**

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christlight for you
in the nighttime of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow,
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven,
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you;
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that l may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

**Gospel Reading: Acts 2:42-47 (New International Version)**

**Read by Nick Finlay**

***The fellowship of the believers***

*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.*

**Sermon: ‘A Vision? *The* Vision? Our Vision?’ - Rev. Tim Chambers**

“Jesus came to launch the Kingdom of God. He ended up with the church.”

So goes the old joke.

It doesn’t sound a very good deal, does it? Is the way that things have panned out over the two millennia since the resurrection all a big mistake? Did Jesus really intend to found the church, with all its denominations and synods, cathedrals and PCCs?

I’ll leave you to answer that final question yourselves! However - and for this there’s a great deal of evidence in the Gospel accounts of his life, as he surrounded himself with a small group of close followers, with whom he frequently shared table-fellowship - what I will say, is that Jesus did envisage small communities of people committed to living out his vision of the Kingdom, and continuing beyond his life on earth. That’s to say, something that looks very much like what we would call a church; a family of believers.

But if - going back to the joke - Jesus came to launch the Kingdom of God, the mission of the church is a calling to be a sign and a foretaste of that same Kingdom; to reveal the person of Christ to the world, in word and deed; in God’s Word, prayer and worship.

I’ve heard it said that the church is rather like a Chinese restaurant. You and I know that, when we go to the Yeung Sing in Bingham for dinner, we’re not actually in China itself, eating utterly authentic Chinese food, prepared using 100% Chinese-grown ingredients by chefs who are born-and-bred locals, all eaten in traditional Chinese surroundings. But what we do get in Bingham is a pretty good approximation of traditional Chinese food, from restaurant staff who, although they may not have actually been born in China, are ethnically Chinese, all in a Chinese-inspired setting. It’s a reminder of the real thing – which is exactly what church is meant to be also.

Church is not – and never can be – the Kingdom, but church is meant to be a community that reminds us of ‘the real thing’, the Kingdom of God. And, at their best, churches are: they are places where people can begin to understand and feel and experience what life is actually like under God’s rule; what a community might look like that really lived in Jesus’s Kingdom, under his rule.

I have a feeling I’ve already quoted Bishop Lesslie Newbigin to you in one of my few sermons as Vicar. But I make no apology for doing so again, since Newbigin expresses a really important thing for us to remember when we reflect on ourselves: “The church is the hermeneutic of the Gospel”.

I know this is rather technical theology-speak, but a ‘hermeneutic’ is a way in which we look at something; like a pair of glasses, through which we see. So, what Newbigin is saying, is that the way in which our world sees and interprets the person of Jesus, revealed in the Gospels, is through what we, the church, look like – i.e. how much you and I, look like the person of Jesus in the way we live our lives, and especially as we live them together, as Christ’s church.

You’ll notice if you read the Book of Acts (which is really the biography of the very earliest church), that - throughout its early chapters - you never hear of people doing things on their own. It’s always a group of new believers, who choose to come together.

And this is precisely what we see in this morning’s reading, from Acts 2, verses 42-47 – a justifiably famous account of what the early church in Jerusalem was like. Today, however, is one of those occasions when the way in which the Church of England’s Lectionary – its calendar of Bible readings – does us a bit of a disservice. Because we miss what is perhaps the most important part of this picture of the early church, a couple of verses before.

This early Christian community, we read in verse 42, was characterised by four things to which it “devoted” itself, to which it committed its whole being, and through which the spiritual lives of its believers were fed:

• the teaching of God’s Word through Scripture;

• the fellowship of fellow believers;

• the breaking of bread with one another (both in the general ‘sharing a meal’ sense of the word, as well as sharing in Holy Communion); and

• prayer.

There is a critical precondition for all of these believers to come together, and for all of them to have a desire to connect with one another and with their Heavenly Father; and this is what’s cut off a few lines previously, in verse 38. We read there, ‘Asked by the people what they should do, Peter tells them, “Repent and be baptised … in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”’

It’s the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon each one of these new believers, and the presence of that same Spirit within them, that results in them coming together with a desire to live so faithfully as disciples of Jesus. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the reason why these early believers are behaving as they are.

The signs of the Holy Spirit at work amongst these earliest believers are multiple:

• the giving and receiving of teaching;

• performing miracles in God’s name;

• radical generosity with their belongings for the benefit of others;

• meeting together to break bread;

• singing joyful praises to the Lord.

All of these signs of the Spirit at work, happen in community; a place of shared life – of life, as Jesus describes it in John 10:10, lived to the full, in the power of the Spirit.

It’s often said that the contrast between the two main bodies of water in the Holy Land, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea, is a very helpful image for illustrating the contrast between a group living with the nourishment of the Spirit we see in this passage, and the fruits of the Spirit which the believers display, and one living without that.

The Sea of Galilee has both an inflow and an outflow; the waters that it receives, it once more gives on, through the River Jordan, giving life in abundance to the lands which are blessed by its waters, and at the same time flourishing itself. But of course the Dead Sea, at the end of the same River, has no means by which to pass on the water that enters it. It is a dead end, with the result is that it is stale, brackish, and utterly devoid of life.

Thus it is that the life of the Christian community recounted in Acts 2 is not a “holy huddle”, turned in on itself. The Spirit gives life to the community; the community in turn passes on that life to others. The new believers give to those who are in need; they meet in public in the courts of the Temple, in a location where they can engage with others who are not yet followers of Jesus. Their overall witness is so spiritually compelling that, as we read in verse 47, “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

This is a vision, in the words of the vicar and theologian, John Stott, of “a learning church, a loving church, a worshipping church, and an evangelistic church,” (to which I’d also add “a praying church”!), all of which flows from the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is a vision of what it means to ‘be church’ that has such a balance between all the elements of its communal spiritual life, and which is therefore so attractive to outsiders, that some have identified it as the vision of church. For them, it is the standard and model to which all churches should aspire, notwithstanding the immense differences between the surrounding culture of first-century Palestine, and, for instance, twenty-first century Britain - with or without a lockdown.

Is this a fair judgement and - if so - what might be the implications for us as the Cranmer Group; as individual churches, and as the combined Benefice?

I have to say that, personally, I find this image of a group of followers of Jesus Christ the most attractive in the whole of the New Testament. There is a communal rootedness in prayer, Word, Eucharist and Spirit, which bears such varied and beautiful fruit, that I, myself, would see this as my starting point for how church might – should, even – look.

I’d love to hear what each one of you thinks about this; to hear how God may be speaking to you about what it is for us to ‘be church’, in this time and place. Do please let me know!

However, I’m very conscious that there are - at least - two implications for us from this; one short-term, and one longer-term.

In the immediate term, in this strange lockdown time, there are so many great things going on, especially from the point of view of mutual support in our individual villages. Thank you all so much for the ways in which you have extended the love of Jesus Christ to one another, and to your friends and neighbours, in this. However, I’ve been convicted by this passage that we’re currently missing - I believe - spiritual connections both between ourselves across the Benefice, and also collectively with our Heavenly Father, in prayer.

I mentioned in my introduction to the service that, later in the month, there’s the global ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ ten days of prayer initiative. Look out for announcements coming soon, from me and from a small group I’m assembling, about how we can connect more deeply (and possibly, for some of us, re-connect) with our Heavenly Father in prayer, in a range of different and imaginative ways, for old and young, introvert and extravert.

A small number of you are already meeting regularly (now on Zoom!) in the ‘Wrestling with God’ group led by Annie Dickinson, to study the Word and pray together. This is a great group, and I absolutely wish to affirm Annie and all who are coming together in this. Do please contact Annie should you wish to join the group; I’m sure they would be delighted to have you with them.

However, to complement this, I’m going to be starting a not dissimilar group, looking at a series of studies by the very accessible American Christian author, Max Lucado, entitled, all-too-appropriately for this time, “You’ll Get through This”. We’ll be doing this short course using online materials - look out for dates and details of how to join this, very shortly.

And I’m also going to see what we can do to enable people to connect more easily with one another, across the Benefice, around these Sunday virtual services – once again, watch this space!

Longer term, I’m very aware that the Cranmer Group, as stated on the Benefice website, aims to be “an authentic and accessible Christian community” and, less prominent publicly, has a vision “To know Christ better and make him better known”.

I’d love us all, perhaps especially in this time of disruption, when so many of our assumptions about what it is to ‘be church’ are, of necessity, being challenged, to take the opportunity to reflect not upon WHAT it is that we want to be, since our identity as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ remains constant throughout all storms. But, rather, to reflect on HOW it is that we live as his disciples, and above all as gathered disciples in his church, growing together in our faith in order that we might be sent to proclaim the Good News to all around us.

I certainly don’t presume to have any answers for us at this very early stage in our shared ministry in the Benefice. But I hope that, starting from the vision we see for the church in our passage this morning; guided by prayer and in the power of the Holy Spirit; we’ll discern together how God is calling us to follow him - together - in the Cranmer Group, over the coming years.

It’s my prayer that each of you will join me in this adventure, and that together we will follow where He calls us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Caroline Coulter**
For the health workers tending the seriously ill
for the scientists working on a vaccination
for the researchers analysing data and identifying trends
for the media outlets working to communicate reality
for the supermarket workers, hygiene and sanitation providers
for the good news stories of recoveries and effective planning
for the singing from balconies by locked-down communities
for the recognition that isolation doesn’t need to mean loneliness
for the notes through letterboxes offering help and support
for the internet and telephones and technology that connects
for the awakened appreciation of what is truly important
Thanks be to God.

For those who are unwell and concerned for loved ones
for those who were already very anxious
for those immune suppressed or compromised
for those vulnerable because of underlying conditions
for those in the ‘most at risk to coronavirus’ categories
for those watching their entire income stream dry up
for those who have no choice but to go out to work
for those who are afraid to be at home
for those who are more lonely than they've ever been
for those who are bereaved and grieving.
God be their healer, comfort and protection,
be their strength, shield and provision
be their security, safety and close companion

And raise up your Church
to be your well-washed hands and faithful feet
to be present to the pain
to respond with love in action
if even from a safe distance.

God, in your mercy,
**Hear our prayer.**

*‘For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come… will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.’* (Romans 8:38-39)

God of heaven and earth,
in these times of isolation,
apart from loved ones
distant from friends
away from neighbours
thank you that there is nothing
in all of creation,
not even coronavirus,
that is able to separate us from your love.

And may your love that never fails
continue to be shared
through the kindness of strangers
looking out for each other,
for neighbours near and far
all recognising our shared vulnerability,
each of us grateful for every breath,
and willing everyone to know the gift
of a full and healthy life.
Keep us all in your care.
**Amen.**

Merciful Father,
**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

**The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the 3rd Sunday after Easter
(Book of Common Prayer)**

Almighty God, who shewest to them that be in error the light of thy truth, to the intent that they may return into the way of righteousness: Grant unto all them that are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may eschew those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.
**Amen**

**We have a gospel to proclaim
Played by Deborah Davies**

We have a gospel to proclaim
Good news for men in all the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour’s name:
We sing His glory, tell His worth.

Tell of His birth at Bethlehem,
Not in a royal house or hall
But in a stable dark and dim:
The Word made flesh, a light for all.

Tell of His death at Calvary,
Hated by those He came to save;
In lonely suffering on the cross
For all He loved His life He gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
Empty the tomb, for He was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share His victory.

Tell of His reign at God’s right hand,
By all creation glorified;
He sends His Spirit on His Church
To live for Him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name Him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing His glory, tell His worth.

We’ve had more traditional worship in our services over the last three weeks. I’d gradually like to start introducing some more contemporary worship songs, so in our virtual service this week, I’m suggesting you also worship to ‘Hope and Glory’, by Tim Hughes, which is rather hymn-like. You can listen to it (with the lyrics in the film itself) at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbjlJpXuW20>

I hope you enjoy it!

**A Closing Blessing**

The God of peace,
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
that great shepherd of the sheep,
make you perfect in every good work to do his will,
working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**