

The fellowship of the king Acts 4:42-47

We're thinking about church... So as we begin, look around you. Have a look at the church.

I wonder what you see? Do you see columns/thick walls/windows, or do you see people: black, white, younger, older, beautiful, less so!

Some of you will know that the word church actually refers to **people**. The Greek word *ekklesia* (translated church) which is where we get the word ecclesiastical literally means a gathering of people. The church of St Nicholas, is you! You are here, and gathered, and you are people.

But of course, the word church has come to also mean the building, and the service, in the way we speak.

So, despite that confusion, do you think people actually think the right way about church?

I think many people think about church how they do a supermarket?

You can pop in for what you need. Either if life is getting you down, and you need an emotional pick me up. Or if you are coming across some challenge and you want to ask for God's help.



Or for some it is more like a cinema? They come to be entertained! It's not quite popcorn-busting stuff, but they sit back and relax, and don't get involved at all, they enjoy the show, they are entertained observers.

Still others think of it like a charity shop?

You go there to give away stuff, to benefit those less fortunate than yourself – but usually stuff you don't need. These people are involved, but I suppose they do it either because they just have something to spare, or to make themselves feel good, or actually, because they're just really kind sorts of people :-)



Now, if those things are true, it's no surprise that many people today think of church as irrelevant and unnecessary.

Because *all* of those things can be found elsewhere, and I think you can find them done better in other groups and organisations, which aren't the church!

So, both non-Christians, and also some Christians-who-think-you-don't-need-to-meet-together think faith can be a private thing.

It can't. When the spirit filled these early believers (start of acts 2), they started to gather together and became a church.

The Holy Spirit creates churches! You are here today because of the work of the Holy Spirit!

And Luke, who wrote this book of Acts, wants us to know what the priorities of God the Holy Spirit are, for a church.

And he wrote these short verses (and they are short but amazing verses aren't they) Particularly with churches like us in mind, people who in the future who would read it and try to learn how to be a better church.

So as I talk about church this morning, I want us each to be thinking about 2 questions.

1. How are we doing at St. Nicks, do we do church in the right way?
2. How are *you* doing with church and your attitude to it?

And as we work through the passage, were going to see four aspects of a spirit filled church.

So have a look there, at Acts chapter 2 and verse 42,
"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer."

So the first thing, is that a spirit filled church is

1) A learning church

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching.

So in one sense, to understand one particular aspect of them, we can imagine that they were a bit like a college. People came along to *learn*, and they worked hard at it!

You might not think people work hard when they're in college, but *here* people were choosing to be there, and they loved it!

He says they *devoted* themselves to it.

I wonder if that is part of the reason why you come to church?

I wonder if you hope to/or expect to learn?

Now, here at St Nicholas you don't have an apostle teaching you from the front! Dave and I can't and won't do the miracles that the apostles did (v43 says that they did signs and wonders, those proved they were from God, that their message was from God)

So although these days it's not helpful to call a church leader an Apostle, we **do** have access to their teaching. That's what the bible is!

I think Luke chooses his words carefully because he has us in mind!

"They devoted themselves to the apostles **teaching**"

The Holy Spirit creating a learning community; shouldn't surprise us, because the Holy Spirit is described by Jesus as "the spirit of truth".

But I guess one danger for some people, is that they think once the spirit comes that he will *directly* teach us, and therefore we don't need to study, we won't need to think, and we no longer need any other human teachers.

But we see here that that's not the case. Just like always, God likes to use *people* to achieve his means. He uses human teachers to teach about himself, and he requires that the believers (and the church together actually) are devoted to the study and learning!

Dave and I actually worked really really hard on our teaching, hoping that it will really help you individually, and us as a church.

But of course, at the end of the day we rely on people's own individual interest and effort. And I hope, seeing here that the Holy Spirit leads people to devote themselves to the apostles teaching, will stir a desire in *you* that you might learn more. Learning more about God is the most wonderful thing!

And as well as Sunday, things like the church weekend at home, and some of the special afternoons that we are thinking about the next year should really help us to grow in this way.

But of course learning isn't the only thing that will happen at the church weekend at, and it's not the only thing which we learn about a Spirit filled church from Acts chapter 2.

The second thing is:

2) A loving church

A spirit filled church is a loving church and we certainly want to be a loving church!

I think the problem here, or the thing that we must remember, is to have high enough standards. I think most churches are thought of, as being loving communities. Both by members of that church and by people from outside!

I *really* think we *are* loving a community, I really thank God for that.

But the standard that God sets for us: is that we lay down our lives for one another – and the example of this early spirit filled church is just fantastic isn't it? And a little scary:

Look at v44 "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"

A guy who wrote about this in the year 300 and something said: "The poor man knew no shame, and the rich no pride"

The picture we get is of people really spending **a lot of** time together, hanging out together, and really looking out for each other's needs – so much so that people would sell things to ensure that their fellow Christians didn't go without.

We can't hear that without looking at ourselves can we? We naturally ask: "have I ever given substantially like that to my church?" (*Could* I do that? Am I willing?)

Now, I say giving to the *church*, because in chapter 4 it explains that they brought the money to the church leaders (the apostles) and *they* were the ones who gave it out. There is a good biblical example that people bring the money to the church leaders, and they are the ones who give it the needy.

And actually, at St Nicholas we have a fund for doing exactly that – and if you want to contribute to the fund that's very easy. (talk to me/Dave)

I want to answer two questions that may be flying around people's minds.

Firstly: Am I saying that everyone *has* to sell their stuff and give their money to our church? Like cults often require people to?

The answer is no, as you probably realise, but we need to hear more than just no, the real answer is "no not *everyone*"

It could be that *some* people do! Remember what Jesus says the rich young ruler, he told him to go, sell all he had, and give to the poor.

That man loved money so much that he *did* have to give it away, and the fact that he wouldn't, meant that he couldn't come to Jesus.

But for most people, no, we don't have to sell everything – we will see that again as I answer the second question:

"Is this realistic?" It sounds so perfect, even too good to be true?

And especially those of you who are quick to accuse yourselves need to hear this – "Yes, it is painting an ideal picture"

Even the early church had its problems, and what we have in chapter 2 is a description we are supposed to aspire to.

So listen to what we hear about in chapter 5: Ananias and Sapphira, give us a negative example.
5v1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

<He said he was giving everything> <but Peter said>

"Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died, and great fear seized those who heard"

Now this isn't to scare you, although it does lead into our next point and reminds us that God see's everything!

But I simply want to show you, that even this glorious early church struggled to do this! So if you're quick to accuse yourself: Please don't pick up from this a reason to feel guilty – please don't go over and over how we are not good enough! Please be spurred on to be more loving.

We must be mustn't we? Our verses say they were *devoted* to fellowship, and *no one* was in need.

We should aspire to this kind of love! Love which means we spend lots of time with each other, love which means we give things up for each other's sake!

Have lunch/dinner with each other, get to know people better, care about them in their struggles, and if you can help – help!

Talk to the me and Dave if you're worried about someone, use the pastoral team. We long to be a loving community don't we? More and more!

I really think we are a loving church!
I'm proud the way I see people caring for another.
But there is room for more

I hope and pray that the Holy Spirit will lead us to be a more loving church.

The next thing we see is that the Holy Spirit led them to be

3) A worshipping community.

I couldn't think of a word that began with "L"!!

The important idea here is that: not simply as individuals, but as a group and community, **God is a focus of what they are doing**, (this is not just a social group) **he** is on their hearts. And, they are glorifying and praising him. **And** they are doing it as a group/as a community.

"They devoted themselves... To the breaking of bread, and to prayer"

We were talking recently as a pastoral team, and saying that even we, the pastoral team, find it hard to suggest praying with people at times.

There is something about our culture, not the church culture, but the British culture (which seems so very individualised) which makes it hard to do that. Do you agree?

This verse is saying, (not simply that the members of the early church were quite prayerful, and that each of them spent time praying).

It saying that they met together to pray, together, as a group, they sought God's will, and together as a group, they were aware of just how much they needed God's help.

They also took communion together, that's what it means by "the breaking of bread".

Communion is a family meal, where those who trust in him, remember that Christ's body was broken (as they break the bread) and his blood was shed (as they pour the wine), for them.

And when Christians do doing that, and share that meal, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, to bring us together and help us to focus on Jesus.

And, did you notice *where* they do this? I think this is really interesting.

They have a really healthy balance between formal and informal.

v46 "Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts [and]
They broke bread in their homes"

So they have the informal: which means that they are getting together in each other's homes - and not just enjoying good friendship/fellowship – but those are **worshipping** times as well, (times when they think about God) and talk about God too. Do we do that?

(They even breaking bread together)

And in a way that I think is quite sad, that feels quite un-British: but a spirit filled worshipping community, has God as part of the informal things that they do together.

And of course they still have a formal, as they gather together in the temple courts, **daily**.
HaHa! That's a suggestion: how about coming to church every day?

Worshipping God really is the heartbeat of this community.
And as well as being both informal and formal, they also have a healthy balance of being both joyful and reverent.

v46 ends "they ate together with **glad** and **sincere** hearts, praising God".

And the church can so easily be just one can't?

You know the kind of churches, you walk in and everything seems very impressive and high, and is a real sense of sincerity and reverence, and there feels like there's no joy. You feel like the place is stuffy, and the people can come across as aloof.

A spirit filled church will have joy.

But of course we can think of churches which feel more like youth clubs – do you know what I mean?

You get a warm welcome, everyone is really friendly, there's loads of fun and joy, and absolutely no sense of reverence at all!

I think the expression used is that "God is less almighty and more all matey"

And that's no good either, a spirit filled church will have a sense of sincerity and awe about God.

And I think here at St Nicholas, we try to do both formal and informal activities, and we try to maintain that reverent balance.

I suppose there are probably ways we could do that better, and please feel free to talk to me and Dave afterwards and point them out!

But the challenge comes to each of us too, are we involved in the worshipping aspect of church. Or perhaps are there some of us, who only choose to get involved with one side of things.

Don't just come to the pool night and the bowling – join a home group, and come to prayer and praise.

Don't just come to the holy communion services, come to the service of the word services too, and the BBQs, and the fun days!

The spirit filled church has a real balance, and things they do are full of worship – and really focused on God!

We should come here for him! To meet with him, and to praise him!

Now, that could almost be the end of my talk:

We've worked through v42.

But one of the books I read said "talks which stop at verse 42 end up being unfaithful to the text"
Yikes(!) [you must talk about evangelism +v47 too]

So the last thing, is that a spirit filled church will be:

4) An evangelistic community

v47 "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Daily! They meet together daily, but not only is there worship daily, but their witness is daily too!

A Spirit filled church looks outwards. They welcomed in people from the outside, they longed that people would join, they knew that part of their mission was to draw people to Jesus!
And they *really* grew! The Lord brought people in!

I suppose, it's not hard to imagine why a community that was learning, loving, and worshipping in the ways that we just considered: would be a growing community!
It's attractive, and people want to join in!

Sadly though... I'm not sure in our country people do want to join in. There's no denying that the Church of England (at least) is *not* growing but shrinking. (lots of studies have shown that)
Although people *are* becoming Christians and joining churches, it's not many. I'll let you draw your own conclusions.

But I guess, only doing church on a Sunday for example, and other ways churches fall short of what we've just seen, is part of the explanation of our struggle and decline.

But what about us here at St. Nicholas?
Do you know if we're growing? Does it matter to you?
Well, yes, we are. Steadily but slowly.

Do you know how we reach out? Do you want to be a part of those things?
Things like the identity course. Why not come along on Friday, it's not too late, to come, or to invite a friend to come along.

We can bring our friends on Sunday for that matter, where every week we do lots of the things that we talked about earlier, and people can come and see, and hear.

Pray for our outreach.
We do things out of the building, like in care homes.
We do things inside the building, like snack and chat on Wednesdays, and little lambs (mother + toddler group) on Fridays.

You can help to invite people along to your home group.

Even if you don't know how you can be part of the church's outreach, loving the people who are here, learning, and ensuring you come with an attitude of worship, means you are helping us to be the church we're meant to be – and when we are, that's attractive.

We need to be a learning church, a loving church, a worshipping community and an evangelistic community.

Why not just take a moment to pray to God about your role in one of those, let's just have a moment of quiet.