

ACTS 2.43-47: CHURCH IS NOT BORING!

[Chelmsford 24 November 2013]

Church is boring!

According to TV entertainer Noel Edmunds: "*The church is the dulllest experience that we have in this country*". And to be fair, in many cases he is right!

There is a wonderful story of a vicar, who was taking a small boy around his church and showing him the war memorial stones. "*These are the names of those who died in the Services*". The boy asked: "*Did they die at the morning service or at the evening service?*"

Thank God people do not normally die in a church service, but they certainly fall asleep. Indeed, I confess that on more than one occasion I have fallen asleep in a sermon – and it wasn't my own either! In this respect I came across the following observation: "*Many churches are now serving coffee after the sermon. Presumably this is to get the people thoroughly awake before they drive home*".

We laugh. And yet there is some truth in these witticisms. Church is not the place where most people want to go. To quote Nicky Gumbel: "*Some tick off 'church' on their list of yearly duties, somewhere between visiting Great Aunt Edna in Hove and making a cake for other village fete. The attitude of others is summed up in a ditty:*

*So when I have nothing else to do
I think I'll pay a visit,
So when at last I'm carried in,
The Lord won't say, 'Who is it?'"*

What's gone wrong?

- Are preachers to blame? One critic described the sermon as '*a monstrous monologue by a moron to mutes*'?
- Or are the people in the pews to blame? A farmer once likened many church members to his mule: '*Awfully backward about going forward*'.

The reality is that probably both preachers and church members have played their part in putting people off church.

However, this morning I want to suggest there is a more fundamental problem.

Most people perceive church in terms of services, whereas as far as the New Testament is concerned first and foremost church is about relationships.

When we are 'born again', we are born into a family – and all of a sudden we discover that we are related to 100s, 1000s, millions of others.

That is the strength of the church.

Not every church can have the greatest of preachers – nor can every church have the greatest of musicians – but any church can be a place where love is found, people are valued, and the ups and downs of life are shared.

With that in mind I want to look at Luke's description of church life in Acts 2.41-47

In some ways it is not fair to compare the church then with the church now. At that stage the church was still in its honeymoon period.

God was doing amazing things amongst them.
People were being converted left, right and centre.
And, of course, the church had the benefit of the apostles teaching – can you imagine being taught by somebody who had known Jesus? How I would have loved to have been in the congregation then!

But the thing which impresses me is the depth of relationships within the church.
It is here that we have something to learn.

1. People opened their homes to one another - and so too should we

Luke tells us: **“Day after day..... they had meals together in their homes”** (2.46)
I find that remarkable. Can you imagine a church where people were in one another’s homes on a daily basis? In our church we have to organise hospitality.
We have hospitality Sundays when people are encouraged to invite people back home
And even then, it is a minority of people who get involved.

But in the Jerusalem church hospitality seems to have been second nature.
People just opened their homes to one another.
We are told **“they had meals together”**. I doubt whether it was anything special.
The early Christians weren’t into dinner parties, with the best china and Cordon bleu cooking.
They were in the business of genuine hospitality, where what counted was not extravagance and perfection, but rather warmth and simplicity.
And the church grew. Luke wrote: **“every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved”** (2.47). And no wonder. For what the church in the first place was offering was friendship.

Here is a lesson for us as a church – as indeed for every other church.
If we want to attract people to church, then we need to be a friendly church.
And by friendly I don’t mean giving people a warm handshake as they come through the door, but accompanying that welcome with an invitation back home.

The fact is that we live in a world where many are longing for friendship.
People are lonely and they want to belong.
This is why we as a church have adopted as our strap line the words *‘Central Baptist – a place to belong’*. People are not yearning for great sermons, nor even for great worship.
They are looking for meaningful relationships – they are looking for friends.

We can meet that need by opening up our homes.
I find it significant that time and again the Scriptures emphasise the importance of hospitality.
☐ Peter, for instance writes: **“Open our homes to each other without complaining”** (1 Pet 4.9) - the implication is that some did indeed complain!
☐ The author of Hebrews: **“Remember to welcome strangers in your homes. There were some who did that and welcomed angels without knowing it”** (Hebs 13.2)

I often encourage newly married couples to open up their homes on a monthly basis to others.
I sometimes suggest that they make a particular Sunday in the month ‘Hospitality Sunday’ when they invite a friend or two for lunch.
But such a suggestion pales into insignificance with what happened in Jerusalem.

There hospitality was on a daily basis.

What's more, it could not just have been friends they invited - or at least not friends of long-standing - because the church had only just come into being.

The three thousand who responded to Peter's preaching at Pentecost were not buddies of one another, but almost certainly strangers to one another.

And yet all of a sudden they discovered that they were one in Christ. In the words of one commentator, "*The real miracle of Pentecost is to be found here - that from so diverse an assemblage of people 'from every nation under heaven' (2.5) a unified body of believers is formed*" (Willimon).

So, in the first place, let us open up our homes to one another – and to others.

Let's do church – over a meal.

2. They opened their lives to one another – and so too should we

Those first Christians in Jerusalem did not simply open up their homes to one another - they also opened up their lives to one another.

They practised not only hospitality, they also **practised community**.

- Luke tells us in Acts 2.42 that "**They spent their time... taking part in the fellowship**". Or as the more traditional versions put it: "**They devoted themselves to fellowship**" (NRSV/NIV).

- Similarly in v44: "**All the believers continued together in close fellowship**".

Roy Clements commented: "*Here was a group of people who did not want to be spectators, but participants. Church for them was not just an institution they went to on a Sunday, it was a community that formed the context of their whole lives and about which they felt passionately enthusiastic*"

Church was about community - it was not just about fellowship - it was about a shared life.

It was not just about being friends, it was about being brothers and sisters.

Sadly we have allowed the word '**fellowship**' to mean little more than being polite to one another after the service. But fellowship in New Testament terms means goes way beyond the kind of small-talk in which most of us engage Sunday by Sunday.

It is about belonging to one another.

It is about being committed to one another.

It is about being family!

Every time I welcome people into membership I say: "*In a Baptist church membership involves entering into a dynamic covenant relationship with one another - a relationship in which we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ's kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost*". I then go on to ask the church this question: "*Do you promise to love, encourage, pray for and care for*" these people we are about to welcome into membership?

To devote ourselves to the fellowship is to share life together.

The fact is that we need one another.

It is not always easy going the way of Jesus in world which seems to be going in different direction. We need to encourage one another and help one another along the way.

In the words of Michael Griffiths: "*Christians need to become aware that they are not solitary searchers after truth, isolated wrestlers with temptation, and lonely worshippers confined within the limits of their own subjective religious experience*" (Cinderella with

Amnesia)

Fellowship - the sharing of life together - is about being real with one another - so that we can truly help one another.

Sadly, for the most part it is impossible to experience true fellowship on a Sunday.

We are too large a group. However, fellowship in the sense of meaningful community becomes more of a possibility as we break down into small groups.

At the moment about half the church are involved in home groups – but would that all the church were in home groups!

At the moment we are a church with home groups – rather than a church made up of home groups. And that is very different.

3. They opened their purse strings to one another – and so too should we

Listen again to Luke's description of the church in Jerusalem: **“They would sell their property and possessions, and distributed the money among all, according to what each one needed”** (2.45).

We are not told who the needy were - but if Acts 6 is any guide, then they will have included widows (NB in those days there was no such thing as old age pensions).

They will also have included the 12 apostles - for in coming to Jerusalem from Galilee they had cut themselves off from their previous economic roots - Peter, for instance, had no opportunity to fish in Jerusalem.

It is often suggested that the early church experimented in a form of ‘primitive communism’. Certainly their life together is reminiscent of the Marxist maxim *“From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”*.

However, there is a signal difference. The Marxist revolution is achieved by force of arms, whereas the Christian revolution is achieved by the force of love!

Some have suggested that the early church abolished private property altogether.

However, it seems closer to the truth that there was a renunciation of possessiveness.

- Certainly the way in which special attention is given to Barnabas for selling a field (Acts 4.36,37) suggests that there was something unusual about his act.
- Likewise in the later incident concerning Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11), it is made quite clear the first Christians were under no compulsion to sell their property and give the money to the church.

No, what happened was that people did not hold tightly onto their purse strings - instead they opened up their purse strings and cared for those in need.

They were a generous, loving church

I find it significant that the Greek word for fellowship (*‘koinonia’*), when adapted into an adjective (*koinoikos*) had the meaning of generous

Fellowship involved not just sharing lives, but also, where necessary, sharing possessions.

It is an interesting fact that later when Paul began to urge the churches he had founded in Greece and elsewhere to take up a collection for the poor in Jerusalem, the term he used for the collection was *‘koinonia’* (2 Cor 8.4; 9.13). In every sense it was a fellowship fund.

Here again there is a challenge to us go pattern our life on that of the Jerusalem church and be generous in meeting the practical needs of one another.
To be fair, I know that this is what sometimes happens.
But there is no doubt that we could do more.

The result of this sharing life together? Church growth!

Yes, the quality of their life together was such that people were drawn to Jesus!

Luke tells us that, as a result of the way in which they lived, they enjoyed **“the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved”** (2.47)

There was an evangelistic edge to their life together.

Their fellowship had a winsome attractive quality about it.

It acted as a sounding board for the Gospel - indeed, it was an embodiment of the Gospel

John Poulton: *“The most effective preaching comes from those who embody the things that they are saying. They **are** their message... Christians... need to look like what they are talking about. It is **people** who communicate, not words or ideas”*

Alas, time and again the Christian church has put people off the Christian faith.

As one young person once said to me, *“If that is institutional religion, then you can stuff it!”*

The challenge to us as a church is to live out our faith together in such a way that people are attracted to Jesus.

The fact is that if people in Chelmsford are to respond to the Gospel, then it will be not least due to the way in which we express our life together!

So to return to the objection with which I began: *‘Church is boring’*, say many people outside the church. To which we can reply: *‘Not necessarily so! Come along with me to my church next Sunday and discover that church can be a great place to belong to’*.