

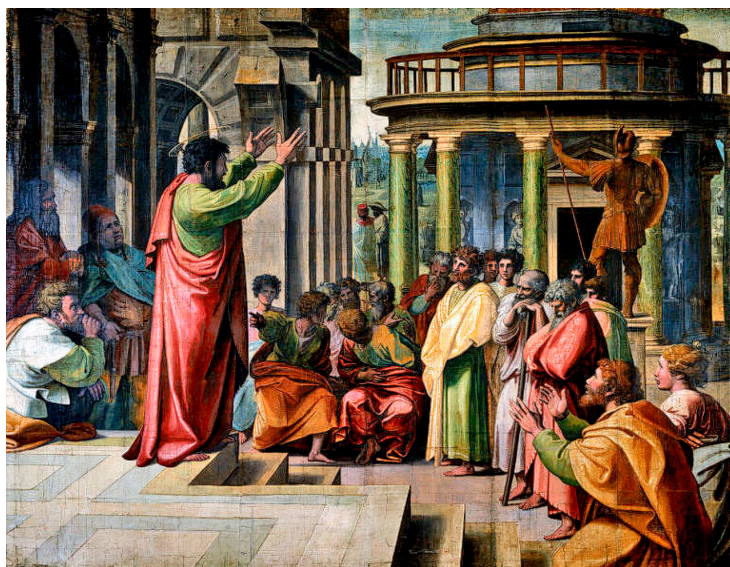
Study 4 The life of the Church

Key verse

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
(1 Peter 2:9)

Opening discussion

How could the Church appeal more to those outside its current reach, and should it?



A worshipping community

(Read 1 Peter 2:9-10, Acts 2:42-47, Ephesians 5:15-21)

Peter sums up the Church in Old Testament terms echoing descriptions of the people of Israel. Christians are 'chosen' as children, a family of God, and for service. They are a 'royal priesthood', with access to God but also offering their work, worship and themselves to God. And they are a 'special possession' (NIV), a phrase which reflects the real value of the individual Christian in God's eyes.

We see the Church reflecting Peter's words in Acts 2 as the believers' thirst for understanding, fellowship and worship, both in the Temple and in their homes, leads to an outpouring of love into the community. They were a joyful, happy people, well liked, and we are told that others were daily added to their number.

This spirit of worship is to carry on into everyday lives and work. There's a sense in which lives need to be filled with something, and Paul in Ephesians tells the believers not to follow the example of the world, but to be filled with the Holy Spirit and allow the Spirit to bring songs of praise and joy into their daily lives.

The early Church did not have purpose-built buildings for worship at this time, they used homes or rented rooms. We read in Acts 19:9-10, 'So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord'. And commending Aquila and Priscilla in Rome to his readers Paul says, 'Greet also the church that meets at their house' (Romans 16:5).

Quotes

'About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing.' (Joan of Arc)

'Anyone who is to find Christ must first find the church. How could anyone know where Christ is and what faith is in him unless he knew where his believers are?'
(Martin Luther)

Discussion

- 1 Reading the passage from Acts, can you envisage ways in which your own church might embrace something of the life of the Christians in Jerusalem?
- 2 Are Paul's words to the Ephesians still able to speak to this generation of Christians?
- 3 What other ways than our regular Sunday services are there of 'being church'?

Being disciples – the challenge of discipleship

(Read Acts 19:1-6, John 15:4-17, 1 John 4:7-12, Ephesians 4:20-24, 5:1-2, 8-11)

At its most basic, discipleship is a response to the call to follow Jesus. Like Matthew at the tax booth, or Peter at his fishing nets, disciples hear the invitation to follow Jesus and choose to respond. The passage from Acts suggests a definition, of a believer who is at the start of a spiritual journey with Jesus and is keen to progress. Jesus himself emphasises the importance of that continuing relationship when he tells his disciples to stay connected to the vine (John 15:4-6) and share the same love he has shown to them with each other

The command of Jesus to his followers is to be fruitful in their discipleship, and the key to that is love (John 13:34-35). This theme is picked up in John's first letter, that by demonstrating a life based upon the love received from God, so God is revealed to others (1 John 4:12).

Discipleship embraces the whole of our lives - our personal habits and public commitments, our work lives and home lives, our thoughts

and our actions (Ephesians 4:20-24). It is a life-long commitment to journeying together with Jesus as children of the light (Ephesians 5:8-11).

Discussion

- 3 Do you feel like you are on a journey? Did you begin the walk well equipped for all conditions and how has it been so far?
- 4 Are you able to share something you have learned along the way?
- 5 Is it a journey you would recommend to others?

'Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.' (Acts 11:25,26)

'Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' (Ephesians 5:1,2)

Out in the world

(Read Philippians 2:12-16, Gal 6:8-10, Romans 10:14-15, Acts 11:19-30)

Paul continues the theme of journeying in his letter to the Philippians. Discipleship is a day by day working out of what God is wanting to do with our new life, alongside the struggles to fully rid ourselves of the old. 'Let us not be weary in doing good,' Paul says to the Galatians, 'for at the proper time we will reap a harvest.'

Jesus' disciples were commanded to take the message to the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 29:19). Now Paul tells the believers in Rome that the baton is passed on to them and all believers because how can anyone in the world, Jew or Gentile, have the opportunity to know Jesus and accept him as Saviour if no one has shared with them the Good News? Mission should be a vital part of every church's agenda, both doing and supporting those called to this work.

'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.'

There are many passages describing the mission work of the early churches but Acts 11:19-30 seems to give such a good insight into the spread of the gospel, particularly around

Antioch. This was the first time that the gospel was deliberately preached to the Gentiles.

Prior to this moment in time Paul had preached to the Samaritans (who were half Jewish and therefore formed a bridge between the Jewish and Gentile world), and Peter had accepted the God-fearing Cornelius. Now it was the beginning of a world-wide mission, and interestingly we don't know the names of those who made the first move (Acts 11:20).

Discussion

- 6 How can the call to make disciples filter down to the ordinary person in the pew, and their daily life?
- 7 We reap what we sow, says Paul. How does that work out even within the Church?

Through good times and bad

(Read Ephesians 4:1-6, 1 Cor 1:10-12, Acts 15:36-40, 2 Cor 11:24-28)

In an ideal world the growth of the early Church would have progressed steadily and without troubles. However, as we read through Acts and the letters and epistles within the New Testament, we discover that life for Christians was at times anything but smooth. There were times of great joy, but also disagreements, disunity and no small amount of persecution.

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul urges them to adopt a spirit of humility and gentleness in their dealings with one another, imitating the

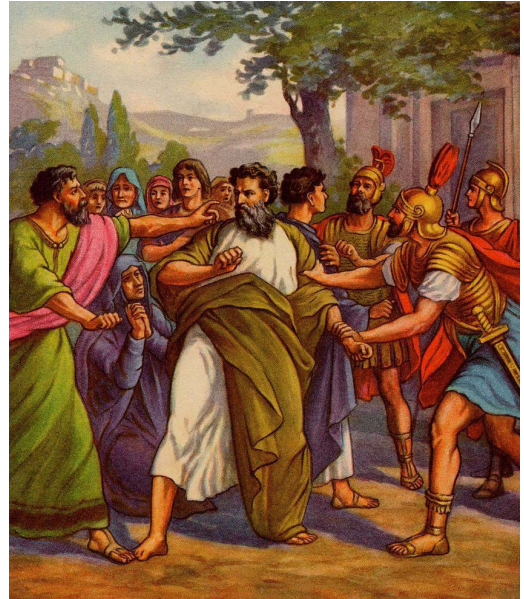
unity of Father, Son and Spirit in the Godhead. But in his letter to the Corinthian Church we see the beginnings of disunity which he is keen to stamp out. Acts 15 has Paul himself falling out and parting company with Barnabas after a disagreement.

Persecution was evident from the earliest days, as we see with the graphic description of Stephen's treatment and death. Paul, who witnessed that episode found much opposition to his own uncompromising message as an evangelist. In the passage from 2 Corinthians

he graphically describes his own suffering, the constant moving in order to evade capture and the long sleepless nights he endured in his work. And yet he can still go on to describe the wonders he has seen, the miracles of God, and knows from where his strength comes to persevere.

Discussion

- 8 There are several major Christian denominations in the world. Are differences about the way we worship, or views about baptism, communion, spiritual gifts, contemporary music, saints etc damaging for the Church as a whole, or opportunities for people outside to find a home they feel comfortable within?
- 9 How important is unity within both the local and worldwide Church?
- 10 After 2000+ years, how well is the Church doing?



Quote

'My family, frankly, they weren't folks who went to church every week. My mother was one of the most spiritual people I knew but she didn't raise me in the church, so I came to my Christian faith later in life and it was because the precepts of Jesus Christ spoke to me in terms of the kind of life that I would want to lead.
(Barack Obama)

Thought for Prayer

Pray for those who are struggling to find a church that they feel comfortable and 'at home' within.