

17th September 2017

Acts 19.1-20

We finish our look today at the Holy Habits the first apostles in the early church adopted to nurture and sustain their discipleship, giving them a strong faith to survive the pressures and persecutions they endured. If I'm being accurate I should say this is the last Sunday sermon on this topic – for the theme of our church weekend next week is all about prayer, which of course is a vital holy habit. If you have missed any – then just a reminder that transcripts for all these sermons are on the Tab website: dursleytab.org.uk.

So far, we have looked at the holy habits of breaking bread, the apostles teaching, service, giving and generosity, fellowship, eating together and making more disciples. They were all based on a verse in Acts chapter 2 that described the life of the early church:

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 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.

It's a picture of a dynamic and spirit filled church which of course sets a template for us and all churches through all generations. In our last Holy habit, we consider the topic of worship. IN many ways Worship encompasses all these Holy Habits. All we do as Christian is worship. We give |God glory, we show who is worth our praise, dedication, giving, time and service. All life is a worshipful response to God's grace, promises, gifts. Even in the worst of times we worship because we know we are not defined by our situations, our suffering, our afflictions, addictions, illnesses, frailties. Because we believe in a God of redemption who seeks to bring good out of all situations and will one day transform all things. So in worship we are reminded of spiritual realities.

In our busy lives let the Spirit guide us into praise as we look around and see an electricity pylon speaking to us of the power of God, a baby in a buggy speaking to us of new life that god gives, or the sun setting in a golden glory reminding us of the beauty and majesty of God.

It is not as if God neurotically needs our worship, but rather that God, as the Psalms remind us both delights in and in a mystical way inhabits the praises of his people. Worship is arguably more important for our own wellbeing – it reminds us who is in control, who cares for us, where our hope is. Worship forms us. Someone said that ‘we become like the things we most love and desire’. This of course has been said about pet lovers for years. But it is also true of Christians – where we take head knowledge down into the heart, the place that transforms us. Spirit speaks to spirit: spiritual transformation happens as we encounter God in worship.

In a healthy loving relationship there needs to be regular times at which those who are committed to each other affirm their love and commitment. We need to beware of becoming like the down to earth plain-speaking Yorkshireman who in response to his wife’s lament that he never told her that he loved her said: ‘I told you the day we were married I loved you. And if the situation should veer change I’ll let you know ‘

So personally, it is important to have daily moments set aside for worship. It is also important to set aside times to gather with fellow disciples to worship the one who calls us and unites us. Remember that the root meaning of the

Greek word ecclesia that we translate into English as ‘church’ is ‘gathering’.

Those gatherings can take on all sizes, from intimate gatherings in houses or prayer groups to larger gatherings like what we experience on Sunday morning. With a broad group of people, you won’t be able to please everyone all the time but hopefully with some love, tolerance and understanding we can worship together or find a variety of worship styles to accommodate our needs. In our church meeting you will hear about some new initiatives to renew our worship life here at the Tab.

In our tradition worship can be led by anyone. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. Indeed, today is the one hundredth anniversary of one of our founding denominations, the Congregational Church, ordaining the first woman minister for a mainline denomination in this country. Constance Colman was raised in the Presbyterian church but they wouldn’t ordain women so she applied to Mansfield College Oxford. the principal against his initial reservations, accepted Constance’s application. There was no guarantee that she would be ordained at the end of her training but it was September 1917, at the height of the Great War, when there was a shortage of men. That gave women an opportunity to do ‘men’s work’ and lo and behold they discovered they were just as able. Constance

opened the door for others to follow. She became a founding member of the Society for the ministry of women, supporting women as they trained for ministry. She even learned Swedish in order to support efforts to open up ordained ministry to female ministers in the Church of Sweden. Today most churches have a common understanding that God calls both women and men to lead churches and conduct worship and gender does not define a person's calling.

Let's look at powerful worship in the early church that is described in Acts 19. Last week we looked at chapter 17 where Paul is in Athens and his attempt at sharing the gospel and making more disciples. Chapter 18 sees Paul move on to Corinth. He meets up with Priscilla and Aquila, a husband and wife leadership team, and we also hear about another preacher Apollos. If you want to know more about these early Christian leaders and how they crop up elsewhere in the New Testament, come along to the next Bible Class a week on Thursday, 28th September at 7.45pm in the Community Rooms lounge.

In chapter 19 Paul finds himself in Ephesus. He had heard that Apollos had been preaching a baptism that was in the name of John the Baptist and not in the name of Jesus and by the Holy Spirit. So, Paul asks them what baptism they have received and they say John's. Paul says, 'well that

was about repentance'. The baptism of Jesus is about receiving his Spirit, becoming one with Christ and being equipped for his service. So, he places his hands on them, prays for them and the Holy Spirit comes upon them. They speak in tongues and prophesy.

As you read the Acts of the Apostles you find that they seem to be making it all up as they go along. We tend to have too much a monochrome view of early Christianity and what went on. No-one with any detailed experience of the life of any local church will know that however well people are taught, and how ever careful and wise the pastoral work is some people never quite get the point, and other people persist in holding on to strange or bizarre opinions or practices or both and things still happen which from a strictly purist point of view would be regarded as, to say the least, 'irregular'. Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage said he knew of one woman who kept bringing her cat to church and breaking the communion wafer in half to feed the other half to her cat. when challenged, she always explained that the cat was the reincarnation of her late husband and she wanted to share communion with him.

Paul says here 'into what baptism were you baptized?' There are some weird things going on in churches and worship down the centuries. Some people may think we

are weird. What is weird is Christianity without the power of the Holy Spirit at work. This is what Luke the writer of Acts is trying to convey. Many people try to make Christianity all about morality, doing good, being good, having a ticket to heaven. It is not the full package. Crucially you are missing out on the spiritual side and the spiritual power.: God's Holy Spirit at work in the lives of individuals and in the wider community. Jesus says in John's gospel that worshippers need to worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4.22-23).

Ephesus was a great city in what is now the west coast of modern day Turkey. It was a hub of trade routes full of culture, money temples, politics and power: especially religious and spiritual power. Perhaps that is why Luke in writing this account of Paul's work there starts with a story of a fresh outpouring of the Spirit. There must be nothing second hand about the Spirit's power when you are faced with the powers of the world.

The question of power – how to get things done – is at the heart of a great many of today's debates. There are regular alternatives. At one end of the scale you have societies where the rulers simply decree what's going to happen and if people kick up a fuss they send in the tanks or the bulldozers. Simple. And costly. At the other end, you have societies where there is so much discussion, so much

referendum voting so much lobbying in the newspapers and media that people drown in a sea of words and paper and the real things that perhaps ought to happen are lost in the fog of multiple compromises.

And in the middle many people are uncomfortably aware that the question of political power – how to order, steer or change the way a society functions – is only one aspect of a much larger and mysterious question: how to transform people's lives? Perhaps the two dimensions are more closely connected than we sometimes imagine. It isn't just transforming individuals, one by one, so that society gradually transforms with them. Sometimes you can't wait for that. If William Wilberforce had waited for enough people to have been transformed so they could see how evil slavery was, he would have been dead half a century before the urgent and crying reforms were accomplished. But it can't just be a matter of transforming social institutions and public life, otherwise you have a mere outer shell of how things should be, with people inside the shell grumbling and unwilling: a kind of corporate hypocrisy.

We need a change of heart. A spiritual transformation. Worship transforms us spiritually. It should have spiritual power.

It's no accident then that at the climax of Paul's public ministry as recorded in Acts the question of power is front and centre. Paul's ministry demonstrates the power of the name of the Lord Jesus was stronger than all other powers and spirits. It was strong to heal, in ways that hadn't happened before, even with handkerchiefs and towels that had touched Paul's skin somehow bearing healing power to the sick. In particular Luke tells this tale about exorcists who thought they could just add the name of Jesus to their repertoire of magic charms, only to discover that the demon they were addressing on this occasion respected Jesus (and Paul as well as it turned out) but had no respect for them.

Here is a vital principle, which Luke has emphasised elsewhere in chapters 8 and 13: the gospel does indeed provide power, but it is not magic. Magic attempts to gain power without paying the price of humble submission and worship to God whose power it is. But to reject the power, as some also do, because you are afraid of the magic, is to throw the baby out with the bathwater or the teapot out with the teabags.

The most striking examples of spiritual transformation in this story is how the sorcerers burn their magic books and

the confession and renunciation by those who had been practising magic. But then money comes into it and like in Philippi money stirs up trouble when the magicians start to lose their income – and a riot results. Worship cuts against the world. It divides and confronts with the truth of Christ. There will be a reaction. And verse 20 ends this account by saying: In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

Worship is a holy habit that should be in the power of the Spirit and lead to spiritual transformation. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans chapter 12: *This is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

May God help us worship in Spirit and truth.

Bibliography:

T Wright, Acts for Everyone, SPCK 2008

A Roberts, Holy Habits, MD Pub. 2016

