

may not yet be state led in this nation but it lives in social attitudes and family pressures – gentle and sometimes not so gentle voices calling us to put other priorities before the Lord. And sadly the church in our land is sadly dishonoured by scandals, child abuse being the worst. As the church is dishonoured so its message is discounted and its God is rejected. Yet God does not give up on His people. He calls us to have courage, and He calls us to truth and repentance. His blessing is still poured out upon us when we stand against our fears, when we align the action of our lives with the promises of our lips and proclaim the name of Jesus in actions of love and grace-full witness, for in Him alone God's blessing is offered to the world.

We are a people who have received God's blessing so that we might offer His blessing to others. Offering God's blessing to the world is the only mission purpose we really have. There are many means we might use to enable us to be a blessing to others but everything we choose to do must be appraised by that measure: our mission only has meaning when it serves God's intention to bless others with Jesus. If a church sinks its energies into activities which do not realise this purpose it is effectively investing in the enemy's opposition!

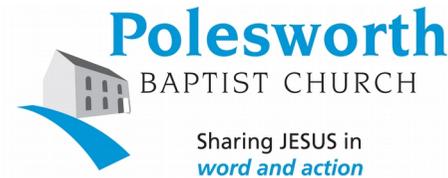
We are God's blessed people. We know God the Father and the Son whom He has sent. God calls us to offer that blessing to our communities. The enemy will try and stop us, by external oppression and by tempting us to practice double standards. If he gets his way the good news of God's blessing will no longer be heard in the land. But if we have the courage and the moral commitment God will bless us.

So I pray and hope you will pray with me that we will be a people willing to suffer to offer God's blessing to others. And I pray that the Lord will honour us as we honour Him, filling us with the Holy Spirit and adding to our numbers – at a pace He knows will stretch us and yet will be right for us, equipping us with faithful, gifted, humble, obedient and teachable people who will help us reach more and more people with God's blessing.

We are all born too late to belong to the early church of the apostles yet we live in their legacy. I would like to live in such a church today. And I pray that we would all desire the same.

In Christ's name. Amen.

[please note that the words written and the words spoken may vary]



Reflections on the Church in Acts and for us today
14th June 2020

When we consider the Church in its life as revealed to us in the Book of Acts we can see both a general reality and an enduring purpose that still affects and governs us the church today.

Let's begin with a question. Not a scriptural one, such as our Joseph has been facing in his bible course, but one of ordinary human experience. Did you ever learn to dance the old-time dances such as the waltz, the foxtrot, the quickstep? When I was young individualised dances like the Twist were the rage. That was easy to do. But old-time dancing is much more difficult. Because you need a willing partner – someone who doesn't mind you standing on their toes, as you learn as you go. It helps to learn with others who are learning, such as in a dance club. It's not wise to try it before the eyes of sceptical mates who're intent on putting you off. And you need an internal commitment to persist, to keep going through your faults and failures. What's this got to do with the church?

First of all the church then and now has a partner who wants to dance with us. God the Holy Spirit calls us into God's dance of love, the dance of true life, fellowship and His Kingdom purpose. But we also have an enemy who wants to frustrate our joining in that dance. He puts us off with external opposition and with internal faults. Everything starts marvellously as we see at Pentecost. The newly grown church is devoted to learning, to fellowship. They experience affirming wonders and miracles. Their love generates a blessing of shared welfare. Praise and favour abound and God adds to their number daily those who are being saved. The dream church the real church we all want to be a part of.

Then what happens? Peter and John going about their daily worship meet a cripple who asks them for money. But instead of money they give him blessing in the name of the Jesus Christ. This man unable to walk since birth is raised up and walks. Of course everyone wants to know what's happening. And what's happening is that the Church is fulfilling God's purpose. Peter's witness to Jesus climaxes in the declaration that they are 'heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with their fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up Jesus He sent Him first to bless you – which implies He will next bless others. The Church, a people blessed by God, is called by God to offer His blessing to all the people on earth. That's our enduring purpose. In the name of Jesus we are blessed to offer God's blessing to

others. That's our prime mission purpose and really we have no other. But what happens as Peter and John share the blessing? Opposition. External attack.

The priests were not happy that Peter and John were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They haul them in and challenge them which leads to Peter making the great declaration that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved," that is come into God's blessing. The church has no other name to live by, no other way to proclaim, no other blessing to offer than Jesus Christ. But when we do that we also have and always will have external opposition. Every week we share news of countries, courtesy of Open Door, where Christians are pressured by religious, family, economic, and criminal power not to share God's blessing in Jesus. In our society all ideas are tolerated until the name of Jesus and then intolerance is suddenly justified. If it were not so our streets would be pavements of protest against the scandal of the world-wide persecution of our brothers & sisters.

But what happens next? Because Peter and John stand up for Jesus and pray for God's power to continue to do so, the church is blessed in a second Pentecost event. The church can be regularly refreshed in the Holy Spirit when it truly seeks God's purpose of blessing the world in the name of Jesus. And the blessing spreads. Much grace is upon them all. The poor are supported by the richer selling property for benefit of others. Barnabas is affected, he sells a field and gives all the profit he gains to the church, for welfare costs money. And then what happens?

Internal opposition. Our enemy attacks us from within as well as from without. According to Luke's Greek it is implicit in Ananias and Sapphira's actions that they publicly covenanted to sell a property and give all the proceeds to the church yet they privately agree to keep some of the money for themselves. They were trying to get the Church's applause for appearing to be like Barnabas, while at the same time serving the selfishness of their own desires. But God knew that they were lying to the church and being deceitful to Him. And God is jealous for His church. How can Christ's church be God's healing truth for a sinful world if its people are being dishonest to Him. Here God practices a tough truth which is often ignored by His later church. God's church must be built on a foundation of values. It cannot be like a house built on sand, or when the storms of the enemy rage it will not be able to stand. Ananias and Sapphira are judged. This puts the fear of God into the church. And what is actually wrong with that? While we rightly stress God's love we must never forget that His love must be protected from evil. Sin means something. The fate of Ananias and Sapphira warns us not to make lip promises to God which we have no intent to keep in our life actions.

Yet what happens next? The blessing spreads in miracles, in a growth of healing and deliverance and in the growth of the Church: more and more men and women believed and were added to the church. As the church protects as well as proclaims the truth of Jesus so God enables His church to be His blessing and so more and more people are saved, and disciplined. This is God's virtuous cycle of growth. And of course what happens next.

Having overcome an internal attack on its integrity the church faces another external attack. Now the leaders are arrested. Yet as they resisted pressure to stop preaching His blessing, so God now releases them from prison to keep preaching His blessing. There's something of God's humour in these events. The high priest and his associates all gather in their pomp and power to question the apostles but they can't be found. They are doing, by God's angelic intervention, the very thing their arrest was meant to stop. So then they are brought in. And accused of making the Sanhedrin guilty of the blood of Jesus, by which words they declare God's verdict upon themselves. And which accusation leads Peter and the apostles to make another great declaration: We must obey God rather than men. Basing that not on the pride of being rebels against authority but on their calling to be witnesses of God's action in raising Jesus from the dead. The Jesus the priests had condemned as being cursed by God by having him killed by hanging on a tree, God exalted to His own right hand as Prince and Saviour that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. A truth witnessed to by God Himself, the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him. Which is why they must obey God.

Now if you go on to read Gamaliel advises the Sanhedrin to let the men go. That is to stop persecuting them on the grounds that if what they proclaim is of men it will fail, but if it is from God, they will not be able to stop it. We might conclude from this that the external opposition stops. But Luke goes on to tell us that it only gets worse. But before then what do we see, the apostles rejoice because they have been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name of Jesus, and they never stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

As we read the Book of Acts we can see that this is the way of the life of the Church. God blesses people to come into His community. His people are opposed by external forces and internal pressures. But because the Church persistently remains faithful to God's purpose the Lord spreads His blessing to the ends of the earth, a process Luke represents by Paul's journey from persecutor in Jerusalem to preacher in Rome.

When we see this the pathway for our own church is surely clear before us. There will sadly be external persecution of God's people from now until the very End. It