

## ALDHAM Sunday 31 August 2008

Reading: Acts 2: 42 - 47 - page 1094

### Introduction

If you were given the task of leading the UK 2012 Olympics team and were charged with it winning 24 medals, where would you start?

You'd look back and ask what lessons are to be learned.

To Atlanta - 1996 - where we came 36th with 1 gold medal? Or Beijing - 2008 - where we came 4th with 19 gold medals?

Obviously we'd first study the **most successful period** of British Olympic Sport.

So if, instead, we are charged with building up the church here in Aldham, what period of Church History should we look to, and what lessons might be learned?

There can be little doubt that one of the most successful eras in the history of the church was the very beginning, when thousands were filled with the Holy Spirit and committed themselves to the risen Jesus. We had this read to us.

*AC 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. 44 All the believers were together and had everything in*

*common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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, 47 praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

### The First "church"

We are privileged to have this account in Acts chapter 2 of how the first 3,000 or so **Jewish** believers lived. **It was a truly Living Church for it grew before their very eyes.** They had no "Rough Guide" or "Lonely Planet Guide" or manual on to how to run a church. They had **no tradition** to guide, or maybe mislead them. They had **no preconceived ideas** of what a Christian church might be like. Indeed, they **did not even have a name** for what they were!

It was four or five years later, that Paul set out for Damascus to find any people who belonged to **the Way** and imprison them.

But they had all received the Holy Spirit.

### Who were they?

Who were these **3,000 people** who heard Peter at the Festival of Pentecost, a **harvest thanksgiving**? They were devout Jews, who probably lived in or near Jerusalem.

Many of them would have **waved palms** as Jesus the Messiah rode into town some 9 weeks before. Many of them would have **been angry** that their Messiah had given himself up to the very people they wanted to be freed from. Many of them would have

called for Jesus to be crucified.

**But this man Jesus, had now conquered more than Rome, more than his ecclesiastical opponents. He had conquered death itself.**

And, as a result of the **Spirit-led preaching of Peter**, and others, they had **put their trust in the risen Jesus** to lead them through the hard times ahead. Though they did not know it yet, some would even risk their lives.

**What did they do?**

***[42] They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching***

So what was the first thing they do? Something very strange. **They devote themselves to the teaching they have received from the Apostles.** Remember, Peter used the OT prophet **Joel** for his text. I'm sure the **other Apostles** would also have used OT texts. It is not much of a stretch of the imagination to see these devout Jews turning to **the great passages in Isaiah** that tell of the coming of the Messiah as a suffering servant.

The verb translated "devoted" is a strong word. It means a **steadfast and single-minded fidelity** to a certain course of action.

They were devoted to the **Apostles'** teaching. Incidentally, is not this the real significance of what we say in the **traditional creeds**: "I believe in one catholic **apostolic** church."? The succession of laying on of hands down the ages is no more than a symbol of the handing down of **apostolic teaching**.

This devotion would enable them to **recognise and deal with heresy**. It would keep them **united** in Jesus in their mission.

So we must ask ourselves: **Are we steadfast and single minded about the Apostles' teaching?**

Whatever our answer to that is, there is no question but that in the embryonic church **it contributed significantly to the spread of the Gospel** in an unprecedented way.

***[42] and to the fellowship***

Then Luke tells us they devoted them selves to the fellowship. The Greek word is *koinonia*. It means sharing - **sharing in** - giving each other the benefits of their experiences, and **sharing out** in the very literal material sense of verses 44, 45.

***44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.***

There are 2 important sides to the fellowship.

**A.**

They were living in the after-glow of the resurrection. But they were also living in the **shadow of the cross**. Their Master had been murdered. What did the future hold for them? So **sharing and caring** for each other was vital in the face of opposition.

**We face opposition today**, not mortal opposition, but opposition that can dent our faith. It can kill our faith. Serious illness, unemployment, bereavement, family difficulties,

financial difficulties can devastate us and destroy faith. I believe we need to **hold together** in an **open sharing** of our joys and sadnesses. **It's part of God's gracious provision** for us that devotion to fellowship in the church sees us through many a rough spot.

## B.

This fellowship would have been **very visible** to those not yet in it.

*V. 47 they enjoyed the favour of **all the people***

Paul calls such a group the **Body of Christ**. A kind of visible witness to Christ. Jesus said

*JN 13:34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this **all men will know** that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

This **caring for each other** would have been **as important to the growth of the church** as the preaching of Peter. **Witness and Word** proclaimed are indispensable partners in the promotion of the Gospel.

Paul goes further and says

*Eph. 3:10 God's intent is that, **through the church**, this manifold wisdom should be made known ...*

**It is exactly the same today.** I am quite sure that many of us here today experienced the call of Jesus through seeing a **warm fellowship in others who had responded to the call.**

We need to remember that a **warm fellowship**, such as we enjoy in Aldham, may help those outside to **respond** to the call

of Jesus.

**[42] to the breaking of bread and to prayer....**

Teaching -> Fellowship -> Worship

So they devoted themselves to **worship and prayer**.

**Breaking bread and sharing wine** was one of the very few commands Jesus left his disciples with. In itself it was an act of fellowship. It focussed on Jesus their Saviour and Master.

**Sabbath worship** began in the temple (if you were in Jerusalem, otherwise in the synagogue) but the **remembrance** of Jesus' death in bread and wine, was **in the home** presided over by the head of the household. (No need to rush around to find a priest!)

"Devoted to prayer." Always a challenge to any church.

But worship is rather more than singing. Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

*ROM 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.*

Fellowship and Worship go hand-in-hand.

*Heb. 10: 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

**[47] ... And the Lord added to their number daily those**

**who were being saved.**

It was **the Lord who did the adding!** They did the loving, the witnessing, the caring, the praying, the worshipping - **and those who had been appointed by Jesus did the preaching**, but the Lord did the **adding**. That should be a **great relief** to anyone with a worry about evangelism.

**So this was a bit of a rag-tag church. But it was also a Living Church**

This was one of the most effective periods of evangelism in the history of the church. Here is a base of 3,000 new, **wet-around-the-ears**, largely un-organised, frightened believers **who do not even know what they are called!** The only detectable **structure** seems to be that it was the Apostles (Peter, James and John) who did the preaching and teaching. In a year or so, other responsibilities would emerge. And it was to be **Paul** who would tell them about the **all-important Gifts of the Spirit** on which the church would grow further.

**We are going to think about these Gifts next week.**

But this crowd of 3,000 must have got the essentials right!

**They hung on to what the apostles had taught** which we know was based on the **person, death and resurrection** of Jesus. They scoured their **OT scriptures** for teaching on the **Messiah** which Peter often quoted. They **cared** for each other, they **worshipped and prayed**. And Peter and the other

apostles continued to preach.

And the LORD added to their number daily.

**There is a challenge** to us today. How do we match this embryonic church in

**fellowship, sharing and caring?**

our strongest suit, but are we making the **manifold wisdom of God** known to others...

**worship and prayer?**

we need to **constantly review** our worship and attitudes to prayer. The breaking of bread in those days was simple home-based Jewish worship presided over by the head of the household. Prayer was corporate.

**devotion to the Apostles' teaching?**

They needed a solid foundation of belief. They needed to equip themselves **to face up to false teaching**, to grow spiritually and **maintain a united fellowship**.

If we are honest, we need to do the same. We get into the **habit of listening to what others** have dug out of the Bible, but are sometimes reluctant to dig ourselves.

If you have dug out a **flower bed**, raked it, sowed seed or planted cuttings and seen the flowers grow you know a lot more about that flower than if you buy it at the **supermarket**.

Digging around in the Bible is important.

I never liked gardening, particularly digging, on my own. I much preferred it if Jennifer was also gardening.

There is something similar about digging in the Bible. It's much more fun if there's more than one of me! It's what we do two **Home Groups**. I think it really helps to build us up spiritually. **I would love to see a third group in Aldham.**

**And maybe the LORD will add to our number, lets say, regularly.**