

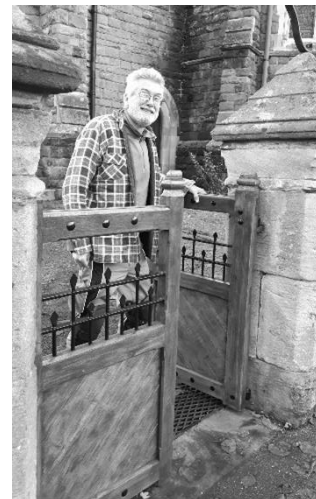
## Sermon for Sunday 30 April 2023 – APCM (Rev Phil Wootton)

### Acts 2: 42-47 & John 10: 1-14

Jesus said, 'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. ... I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'



Gateways and entrances are important. At Christ Church the wooden gates to the road have been renewed this year, whilst at Good Shepherd it seems from the picture the door is always open. Our continual challenge is to open the doors wide enough that all may come in. Obviously, neither the church building nor the church community, is the same as Jesus the true Gate. Nevertheless, both building and people exist to open the way to him. Our hope, desire and longing is that ever more people will come through our doors and receive the fullness of life Jesus came to bring.



Acts chapter 2 gives a picture of the earliest church, and ends by saying: 'The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' We are always delighted to welcome newcomers to our churches, but we could hardly claim this happens every day. This prompts the question, what were the earliest Christians doing that we don't? How do our priorities measure up to theirs? Verse 42 says, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer' – four things:

- So, first, we ask ourselves how devoted are we, individually and collectively, to the Scriptures that contain the apostles' teaching? 'Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest,' says the old collect. I would want to add, question and interrogate – not to undermine, but to bring to the Scriptures the questions our age is asking. (That, incidentally, is what we've been doing in the Book Club and in our recent Lent course.)
- Second, they devoted themselves to fellowship. It's been great to see people staying longer after services and coming to things like *Place of Welcome*, valuing fellowship with one another. Fellowship also entails the mutual support, pastoral and practical, and sharing in the tasks that keep the whole place running.
- Third, they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread. Probably, shared meals and the Eucharist went together. Both our churches are Eucharistically focussed: are our minds equally as focussed as they come to the Lord's table?
- Fourthly, they devoted themselves to prayer. We all pray in our own ways, but getting together to pray rarely receives the priority it deserves. I do rejoice in developments old and new ways of praying: old, being the revival of Evening Prayer on a Friday; new, the Contact and Support WhatsApp group through which so many prayer requests and thanksgivings are shared.

Apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer: four of the basics of church, and, crucially, undertaken with devotion – not as an afterthought, not spare time, not fitting around other things, but the central focus of life.

Two more elements are included here: first, they sold their possessions and held everything in common. That's not something that regular Christians, even in the Bible, have practised since those very earliest days. But sharing and generosity, holding on to possessions lightly, looking at using what we have for the good of all – those things are essential to Christian community, and can be some of the most attractive features of Christianity to outsiders. Second, there is the awe and wonder at what God was doing, leading to delight in meeting every day to give praise and thanks to God. Daily meeting isn't practical for most people, but that overflowing thankfulness is something we need continually to rediscover. It's why the renewal of our worship remains a continual aspiration.

In many ways, we do try to model our churches on the earliest church and what they did. So, what's the difference? Do we do it with the same devotion? We each have to answer for ourselves. Do we share their enthusiasm, which comes across as so infectious and compelling? Or do we convey the message, it's all work? Early days are hard to replicate! After all, theirs was something brand new. They had known Jesus in the flesh, and Holy Spirit had just come upon them. Ours, by contrast, is the 'old, old story' that's been around for two millennia, and with which most of us have been brought up. However, when we celebrate Easter, it is because Christ is risen and never to die again. He is alive to us and for us as he was for the first Christians. He is in the business of making all things new.

If our churches are to be gateways to knowing Christ, let's make sure our worship and prayer is outward-looking and attractive, our fellowship welcoming and open, our service of others inclusive of all. And be confident. Be enthused. Focus on Jesus – not only the true Gateway, but the Good Shepherd who calls us by name, and be a door through which all who hear his voice may enter and enjoy life in all its fullness.