

# Sunday 11th February 2024 - Sunday Service

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Date: 11 February 2024

Preacher: Johan DeJong

[ 0 : 00 ] If you've got a Bible, then please have it to hand. We're looking at Acts chapter 2. We read from verse 36, but we're going to pick it up from verse 42. We've been thinking about Acts and how the Lord Jesus is building a kingdom of good news.

And we've come to a part which is after the first sermon. If you were here last week, we were thinking about the first sermon. And Peter's call for people to be cut to the heart and to recognise Jesus for who he is, to come to him for forgiveness and to be part of his family. What next? What happens now after the first sermon? That's what we're going to be thinking about. Let's just pray as we start. Lord God, we thank you that you've not left us with just a message. We thank you that you've stayed with us yourself and you've left us your word. So we know, Lord, we know what you're like. We know how you want us to be. We know what you would like us to do. So please would you help us, Lord, by your Holy Spirit to leave here today, knowing a little more of what you're like. Understanding a little better how you love us.

[ 1 : 10 ] And how you would like us to live. And we pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. Social psychologists say that in the West at the moment, we're experiencing a crisis of belonging.

And it's destroying us. Their words. Surrounded by other people, we're experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. And some of us don't even realise it.

Here's a quote. We don't do the greatest job of recognising that feeling of not belonging when it happens to ourselves or even to others.

In fact, sometimes we threaten other people's sense of belonging. And it's part of the explanation, they think, for the frighteningly high levels of anxiety and mental health issues.

We don't know who we are. We don't know where we belong. What is the answer to this crisis? And back to the question we were asking just a moment ago.

[ 2 : 13 ] What's going to happen next in the story of Acts? Because we've reached a fairly crucial point. How will all of these different people who have come to realise their need of the Lord Jesus live out the forgiveness and grace they've received?

Maybe more to the point, how is Jesus going to hold on to them, keep hold of them? How will he restore this broken world? How is he going to build the kingdom of good news?

Surely it's going to be spectacular, right? Everybody will know about it. Instantaneous. Jesus' answer to both of those questions, the crisis of belonging and how he's going to restore the world is the church.

And in this passage about the first church, we see that the church is really about three things. Believing, belonging and growing. Now we just need to do a little bit of qualification because what we read about in Acts in some ways is an ideal church.

Isn't it? The Lord wants us to see what it could be like. And there's some symbolic importance here too. So the 3,000 people that we read about who have just been added to their number reflect the 3,000 people who died in the Old Testament after worshipping the golden calf.

[ 3 : 38 ] If you notice in this passage in Acts, there's a huge diversity of people. They flooded in from every part of the known world into Jerusalem. And then a huge number of them came to know the Lord Jesus.

So there's some symbolic importance and we shouldn't necessarily expect that exactly what we read here is what's going to happen in our church. It's not.

All churches everywhere must be like this all the time or you might as well go home. We need to set that expectation right, don't we? But God has left us a pattern for what church should be like.

Believing, belonging and growing. That's what we as a leadership team think Bethel is like and what we should be more like as well. So don't be surprised if those three words come up quite a lot in the next few months.

Maybe you're like me here this morning. You arrived tired and you haven't got less tired since you arrived. So here is the message for those of us who are tired. If you want a place in the kingdom of good news, if you want to be who you were meant to be, then come and believe and belong and grow.

[ 4 : 56 ] So first of all, believe. We all have beliefs, don't we? Whether we articulate them or not, we have them because beliefs is what tells us to say, no, that's not right or this thing ought to be done or those people shouldn't be doing that.

It's your beliefs that tell you to say those things. Beliefs are kind of the things that you hold on to that determine your attitude to the world.

The things that you hold on to. Let's think about holding on to things for a minute. Here's what it looks like if you believe in nobody. Holding on to nothing.

Here's how it looks if you believe in a set of principles, a system. Here's how it looks if you believe in yourself. and here's how it looks if you believe in another human being kind of like you.

Now those may all be good but here's how it looks if we believe in a person more powerful than ourselves.

[ 6 : 12 ] See, that's what believing is really about. It means getting to know and holding on to someone who can really help who's not you, who's bigger than you, who's bigger than anyone else in this world.

Or better yet, getting to know someone who not can just be held but can hold on to you. And that person as we've seen in Acts so far is Jesus.

And so Christian believing is not first of all about a doctrine or a religion. It is about a relationship with that person.

We don't just need to believe stuff about someone, we need to believe in someone. And we need that someone to be deep enough and real enough and good enough for us to keep holding on to him and being held by him forever.

So how about somebody who's infinitely good? That's deep enough, isn't it? How do we get to know him? Well, not from philosophers or priests or institutions but from the people who knew him, met him.

[ 7 : 28 ] Right? The apostles from fishermen and tax collectors. That makes sense, doesn't it? If you want to know about somebody, you go and talk to the people who already know him. So we find ourselves in verse 42 of Acts chapter 2.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Do you remember back in Luke when we were looking at the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts what Jesus did?

He opened the apostles' minds to understand, to understand God's rescue plan. And then in Acts chapter 1 verse 2, he spends time instructing them through the Holy Spirit.

See, they saw, they heard, and now they teach. And that is why words about Jesus from people who met Jesus, which are recorded in the Bible, that is why that's the substance of our belief.

Not my words, not the archbishops, not the prime ministers, not some influences. The words of Jesus entrusted to his followers recorded for us in the Bible. That's what believing is about.

[ 8 : 41 ] If you want to get to know someone and to trust them, you spend time with them, don't you? You talk to them. And so it's not surprising to find that the first church devoted themselves to prayer in verse 42.

believing essentially means praying, being with God, talking to him. Have you noticed that if you really believe in someone, you think they're worth it, that that belief finds expression?

So if you've got a friend, or maybe a husband or a wife, and they really help you, you find yourself talking about them. Or if you really love Tottenham, Elroy, then you sing Tottenham songs, don't you?

And so the first church does the same. It sings praise, verse 47. They all meet together, breaking bread in their homes, verse 47, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.

So learning to know Jesus through what his followers said and what was written down, praying, being with him, and praising, saying how great he is.

[ 9 : 59 ] That is what believing means. What were the apostles teaching about? They were teaching about the Lord Jesus. Who were the first Christians speaking with when they prayed? They were speaking with the Lord Jesus. Who were they praising and worshipping? They were worshipping the Lord Jesus. So the first thing we learn about the first church is that they believed in Jesus by listening to those who knew him, by praying, by praising. And that means that real belief isn't actually blind faith, is it? It's not a vague spirituality. Actually, it also means that theology is not a boring word. because if someone loves you, you want to know about them.

You want to know what they're like. Believing is trusting Jesus, being transformed by a deepening personal knowledge of him. So if that is what believing is, then I think we need to ask ourselves some questions.

Here's a good question to ask. Am I living off sound bites? We all know the problem with sound bites, don't we? They've got no depth. So when you dive into them, head first, you hit the bottom.

[ 11 : 19 ] Painfully sometimes. Jesus is deeper than the ocean. He is enough. And we need to learn to hold on to him and believe in him as he holds on to us.

Do you notice as well what happens when people believe and come together? It results in devotion, verse 42. And verse 43, everyone was filled with awe.

This is what the Old Testament calls the fear of the Lord. And yet, at the same time, it says they had glad and sincere hearts. So there is devotion and awe and glad and sincere hearts together.

Now, if you devote something to someone, it means you give it away. The first Christians literally gave themselves away to Jesus.

And that didn't make them sad. It meant that they had glad hearts. See, the opposite of devotion and awe is not gladness.

[ 12 : 27 ] They're not opposites. The opposite of devotion and awe is casualness. Yeah, I go to church sometimes.

It's all good. I believe in God in my own way. Well, that's okay. But that is not what a Christian is like.

So if we say we are Christians, are we devoted, deeply committed to that transforming personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus? And as a church, are we like this first church?

Are we committed to knowing Jesus deeply through the Bible? Are we committed to expressing our faith in worship with glad and sincere hearts? Are we committed to prayer? Or are we casual about those things?

So we need to believe. but also when Jesus makes us part of his family, we belong. Come back to that crisis of belonging we were talking about at the beginning.

[ 13 : 34 ] It's really interesting. There's been scientific research done that when you feel like that, when you feel like you don't belong or that you're not part of something big, then the biology says that's actually one of the worst things your central nervous system can experience.

It leads to a kind of permanent fight or flight state that not belonging. So we look for a place to belong. And our criteria, the way that we choose the place to belong in this country in the West in general is a good place to belong is the one that gives me what I want.

I get out of it what I want. But that hasn't worked. That's exactly what hasn't worked. that's why we have the crisis of belonging. What we actually need is somewhere where we can be ourselves but not be left to ourselves.

I need to belong to something bigger than myself but not a system or a structure, a person. What is God's answer to that crisis of belonging?

it's adoption. You have your Bibles open. Turn with me quickly to Romans chapter 8 verses 14 and 15.

[ 14 : 54 ] Acts is all about the spirit leading the early believers, isn't it? Romans chapter 8 verse 14. For those who are led by the spirit of God are the children of God.

The spirit you receive does not make you slaves so that you live in fear again, glad and sincere hearts remember, rather the spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship and by him we cry, Abba, Father.

So belonging simply means living out our adoption by our Father as we love and serve one another as family. family. And we know what family is, don't we?

Messy, it's imperfect, but it's precious and it's permanent. That's the church. And here in Acts 2 we see the basics of what it means to belong to each other and belong to God.

Verse 42, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Their belief in the good news of Jesus means that they share fellowship, which just means being in community together regularly.

[16:17] And it means they share food, some of which I can smell right now. Can you smell it? Verse 44, all the believers were together and had everything in common.

they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. They're together, brothers and sisters, sustaining and supporting one another with what they have received from their father.

Time, money, skills, hearts, minds, whatever it may be. And then look at 46, a verse which strikes maybe at one of the things we worship the most in the western world.

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.

Have you heard that expression? My home is my castle. I think that's true in the west. Our homes are kind of these, sometimes got these walls around them.

[17:27] It's the last fortress. Whatever goes on out there, fine, but not in here. It's the last fortress to fall. And yet from the very first, the church opened their homes.

This isn't a cult where you have to turn in your possessions or move to the outback together or whatever. It's not some early form of communism where you have to give up all right to possessions and privacy before you can join.

That's not what's going on here. It's just sharing with one another sacrificially, which is of course what Jesus did for us. It's the family way.

It's not a political manifesto. It's not even a recipe for a happy Sunday morning, because of course church is more than that. This is a revolutionary and liberating way of life that we're called to.

And it leads to a conclusion. doesn't it? There shouldn't actually be any poverty in Jesus' family, local or universal. I mean, what kind of a family is it when one brother drives a Bentley home and the other one can't afford a bus fare?

[18:43] That's not the kind of belonging that Jesus has in mind. It's a bit like the family that wins the lottery. Remember the old lottery adverts? Sort of the huge hand comes down and points and goes, it's you.

And it's just an ordinary street. And suddenly those people are interesting, aren't they? Because they've won the lottery. There's nothing particularly remarkable about them, except that the giant hand has pointed at them.

And Christians are a bit like that. Nothing special particularly about us, but God has poured out his riches on us. Hasn't he? And it changes us.

And interestingly, instead of going and buying new houses, God pouring out his riches on people means they're selling their old ones to care for the neighbours.

Isn't that an amazing idea? Well, it is an amazing idea, and that's why we have things like the NHS and the welfare state in this country, from that idea. Doesn't that make you curious?

[19:52] Isn't that something we need to be a part of? Gratitude is one of those buzzwords that's out there at the moment.

But we don't seem to have very much content for it, do we? Try to live thankful lives. Lots of people would agree with that. But thankful to whom? And belonging is a similar word, see?

We belong to someone, don't we? So once again, we're back to Jesus, belonging to him, by adoption.

So come and be adopted. At the very least, your central nervous system will thank you if you do. And if we have already been adopted, then we need to think about living into that adoption.

creation. It means an identity shift. It means my identity isn't about this culture or country and this time anymore. No, now my identity is about being part of God's family, being a citizen of heaven and eternity.

[21:04] Is that our prayer as Christians? Or are we actually quite happy with one foot in either count? So we need to believe, we need to belong, and when we join Christ's family, we grow.

When you meet a baby for the first time, what's the first thing you notice? Maybe you're a bit like me, the first thing I notice is that they have super-sized heads compared to their bodies.

Huge. Okay, maybe you're not like me. That's what I notice. What's the second thing that people notice about babies? It's how quickly they grow, isn't it?

The next time you see them, they've already changed. They're still the same in lots of different important ways. You've still got arms and legs and the super-sized head is still there. But in other ways, they're not the same at all.

They've changed. And when they grow, their parts grow interdependently. don't they? So the growth of the hand depends on the progress of the heart and the arm and the head because they're attached.

[ 22 : 21 ] And the church is a bit like that. Right up to its super-sized head, Jesus. It grows. And when people believe and belong, they grow interdependently!

Because they're attached to one another, but most of all because they're attached to Jesus. And they grow according to that design, just like babies. And they grow to resemble their fathers and their mothers.

So when the first Christians met Jesus and joined his family, they grew. Have you noticed? Have you noticed the way that these people have grown from the beginning? From scared and hiding in the upper room.

And where are they now? Meeting in public, in the temple courts. From not speaking the same language to inviting each other into their homes. homes. Even selling their homes to meet each other's needs.

When we join God's family, we grow. There's the baby. You seen that sign?

[ 23 : 28 ] It's a bit unclear on there, isn't it? I came across this on the internet, not in person. I haven't been to wherever this is. It says, come as you are, you can change inside.

That sums up Jesus' invitation to us. Come as you are, you can change inside when you join my family. He loves us and therefore he meets us where we are, but he loves us too much to leave us like that.

It's the myth of our time that people don't change. You notice that in the press, don't you? One mistake out. They couldn't possibly be different later on.

A murderer will only ever be a murderer. Once a lawyer, always a lawyer. People are defined, aren't they, by one event.

Not in the kingdom of good news. People can grow. People can change. He can change them. Let's look at verse 46 and 47.

[ 24 : 35 ] 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, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

We all know what happens to babies. They grow up, don't they? And eventually, many of them have babies of their own. they multiply and the church is no different.

That's why they met in the temple, instead of only in their homes, because they wanted to be seen and to be known. They wanted other people to ask, what is going on here? They wanted people to join.

This is witnessing. Acts 1 verse 8, be my witnesses. That's what they were doing. And the result is that the whole city was filled with awe. So when it says in verse 43, everyone was filled with awe, that doesn't just mean the Christians.

the church was so different, like Jesus, that initially they had everybody's favour, verse 47. you notice that they don't suddenly become un-Jewish when they're saved by the Lord Jesus, because they're still going to the temple.

[ 25 : 52 ] It's the same when we join God's family. We don't suddenly become un-English, just because our citizenship is now in heaven. We might still go to the same pubs, clubs, parks, whatever it is. But now with a new story to tell.

And what is the result? They grow in number. And that means that our faith is not a private thing, is it?

Despite the way this world pushes us to think about our faith, it is not private. And that is a good thing, because if it was private, then that care and love that is shown in the church's belonging would not have overflowed into the hospitals and charities that we see in our country today, and people would not be added to our number.

Here's a quote from William Temple, which you might have heard before. The church is the only organisation that exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it. Now, it's a little bit overstated, but there's some truth there, isn't it?

And just before you start worrying that joining the church means losing your identity completely to become part of some giant growing baby, notice that although it's a lot less individualistic than we are used to being, there's still a definite number, individuals counted, if I can put it that way.

[ 27 : 22 ] That's why we have an idea of membership in our church. But don't miss the main point. When we believe and we belong, when we worship and we witness, then we grow as individuals, together as God's family and in number.

When we pray and we point to him in public, God does that work. We're almost done. Just a few more things to share and to remind us of.

This being church, this kingdom of good news is about a person, the Lord Jesus Christ, isn't it? And it is also for the whole person. Did you notice here that hands, heart, head is all involved in these verses?

It looks so weak, so unimportant. When you look around yourself here, in this church, in this place, in this town, it seems so powerless compared to the huge problems that humanity is facing or the massive machine of government.

But it's how God builds the kingdom of good news. Church is how he changes human hearts. And if you want to change the world, then you change human hearts. That's worth being part of, isn't it?

[ 28 : 45 ] God's God's love. this group of reformed sinners meeting together. It starts by people coming and believing and belonging and growing together.

And it spreads by conviction, not might. It's not something you're forced into or born into. It's something that you believe, someone that you believe in.

And it grows until it displaces the empire that it was a part of. And it becomes the single largest movement for good in human history.

In the Old Testament, God's glory used to fill the temple. Do you know where it is now? It's in the church. God's glory fills the church.

So Jesus invites you to come and see that glory. Come, believe, belong and grow. Amen.

[ 29 : 54 ] I'd sing one more song in response. Invite you to stand up and sing with me.