

The Church for the Long Haul

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[0 : 00] Provided your church with manna in the desert. Teaching about your son. Fellowship with your son's followers.! Last Sunday we saw how the church began its life with a spectacular bang.

On the day of Pentecost, as the disciples of Jesus gathered in a house in Jerusalem, they heard a sound like the rush of a violent wind and saw what appeared as tongues of fire over their heads.

These were the outward signs of the presence of the living God. So familiar to devout Jews. Since the days of Moses and the burning bush, fire was a sign of a holy God in their midst.

And had not Jesus himself spoken to them of God's Spirit as like an unseen wind shaking the trees? It's not surprising then that when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, we should read in the book of Acts of a mighty wind and tongues of fire.

These ancient and familiar biblical signs of God's presence among God's people. And indeed, these signs and wonders continued on the day of Pentecost as the crowd responded to Peter's sermon that this crucified and risen Jesus was none other than God's promised Messiah.

[1 : 57] People heard this message miraculously in their own languages. And some 3,000 of them were baptized in response. You might think then that this is how Luke in Acts would end his account of Pentecost.

On that high note of signs and wonders and spectacular growth. That's certainly how many churches like to present themselves today.

Look at our success. But Luke doesn't do that. Down through the centuries to the present day, there have been no shortage of those who have seen big bangs and big numbers as the surest sign of the continuing presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the church.

Times of deep spiritual revival and wide numerical growth in the life of the church are indeed to be welcomed, not discounted. But Luke, Luke ends his account of this extraordinary day of Pentecost on a different note.

He doesn't say tomorrow will be as spectacular as today. No, he prepares the church for the long haul.

[3 : 22] What happens to the 3,000 or so who were baptized that day? They didn't keep looking for signs and wonders and more wind and fire. Instead, Luke says, Religious enthusiasm is a wonderful thing.

And to be cherished, not despised. But to sustain a lifetime of faithful following of our risen Lord, the day of Pentecost teaches us the community of Christ's followers.

You and me need four things. First, we need a compelling story to tell. The apostles teaching about Jesus.

The day of Pentecost closes with the old and new disciples devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. What was it that was distinctive about the teaching of the apostles?

The apostles were those who were eyewitnesses to the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. What the apostle Peter is doing in his sermon on the day of Pentecost is telling the crowd gathered in Jerusalem about this Jesus.

[4 : 52] Peter declares, Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.

And as we heard when we read and studied the New Testament letter to the Ephesians together, the apostles' teaching about this Jesus was not only for the house of Israel.

In former generations, says Paul, this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.

That is, the Gentiles, the foreigners, the pagans, have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

In other words, the apostles' teaching about Jesus is for everyone. Jew and Gentile alike, men and women, young and old, slave and free in the ancient world, and for everyone in our contemporary world, across all the distinctions and divisions of our day.

[6:07] Think of it. When the apostles first started teaching about this Jesus, there were only a few hundred of them, and then a few thousand of them, at most, gathered in Jerusalem.

Today it is reckoned that there are 2.6 billion Christians around the world for whom the apostles' teaching about Jesus is the same compelling story as it was on the day of Pentecost.

I've had the privilege of worshipping with black Christians in America and South Africa for whom the apostles' teaching about this Jesus inspired their struggles for freedom from slavery and apartheid. I've worshipped with a tiny number of Christians in Japan, barely 1% of the population, who've survived centuries of persecution because of their enduring loyalty to the compelling story of the apostles' teaching about this Jesus.

I've gathered with pastors from Fiji to Valo and all the other Pacific islands facing the disappearance of their atoll homes with climate change and finding in the apostles' teaching the compelling story to give their communities hope for survival.

[7:43] I've gathered with poor Christians from the shanty towns of Brazil who know that the apostles' teaching about this Jesus is good news for them, the poor, empowering them to find work and a just future.

And yes, Peter, I've prayed in Balmoral with her late Majesty the Queen, knowing the apostles' teaching about our Lord was the bedrock of her Christian life and public service.

The church for the long haul must sustain its life by hearing again and again this compelling story of Jesus that we find in the teaching of the apostles.

As the old gospel hymn has it, tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love. But second, as the church for the long haul, we need a caring company to keep, the fellowship of believers that Alison spoke so beautifully about in speaking about what Craig Lockett Church means to her.

The day of Pentecost closes with the old and new disciples devoting themselves to fellowship with one another, gathering in each other's homes and in the temple.

[9:10] What was it that was distinctive about this fellowship? We know from Luke's account of the day of Pentecost that among about 3,000 or so new disciples of Jesus who responded positively to Peter's preaching and had been baptized were Jews from all parts of the known world, speaking many different languages.

In other words, from its beginning on the day of Pentecost, the church has been a community which brings people together who are naturally different from one another. What unites us is a common faith in this Jesus whom we know from the teaching of the apostles, these eyewitnesses to Christ's life and teaching, death and resurrection, and who speak of Christ's continuing presence among us by his word and spirit.

More than that, our fellowship with this Jesus who taught God's care for everyone moves us to care for one another like the street pastors. On the day of Pentecost, this mutual care and concern was dramatic and sacrificial.

All the believers were together and had everything in common, selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need. While some Christians through the centuries have followed that verse to the letter, we're all called to follow its spirit and share what we have to meet the needs of those within our fellowship and those most in need in God's wider world.

Most of this caring and sharing happens unseen. I had the privilege of being the parish minister of a working class congregation in the west of Scotland in the late 1980s as the Ravenscrake steel pond was threatened with closure.

[11:13] There were high rates of unemployment and hardship in our community. One day, a married couple in our church came to see me. They said they would like to give an anonymous gift of £12,000 to help the struggling families in our church.

A lot of money in the 1980s. They explained why. When they came from their native Africa to work as medical doctors in the local hospital, they lived in a council house in our parish.

Dark-skinned and foreign, they were welcomed into the church as fellow Christians. and helped as they set up their first home. Now they were well-paid consultants and wanted to give back to these

same working families in the church who had stood by them and now faced their own hardships. They devoted themselves to the fellowship. As it was on the day of Pentecost, so it is today. And third, if we are to sustain our life for the long haul as a church, we need a common meal to share, breaking bread together.

The day of Pentecost closes with the old and new disciples devoting themselves to sharing meals together. What is striking about the Jesus we meet in Luke's gospel, Luke's prequel to his book of Acts, what is striking is how often Jesus is found at table sharing a meal with all sorts of people, including those regarded as unacceptable to God.

[12:57] Indeed, one of the biggest accusations of the Pharisees and scribes against Jesus is found in Luke chapter 15. This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.

This accusation against him prompts Jesus to tell the story of the shepherd who goes after his one sheep in a hundred who is lost and brings him home rejoicing.

Meals with Jesus are occasions for breaking down social barriers, welcoming in the outcasts, and above all, anticipating the heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God when the last will be first and the least will be at the head of the table.

The early church did not draw a tight distinction between its shared meals in common, breaking bread together, and celebrating the Lord's Supper, remembering Jesus in bread and wine.

This reminds us how important our social gatherings are for sustaining the life of the church for the long haul, along with our reverent celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

[14:11] One of the many blessings of coming to Craig Lockhart Church are the many occasions in which you welcome neighbours and visitors into your midst with a cup of tea, the strawberry tea, the gild teas, the tea group, the welcome space, teas after the service.

I think you should adopt the tea bag as well as the steeple as the symbol of Craig Lockhart Parish Church. And fourth, and finally, if we are to be the church for the long haul, we need a compassionate God to trust, praying to the one Jesus called Father.

The day of Pentecost closes with the old and new disciples devoting themselves to prayer. Again, in his gospel, Luke's prequel to the book of Acts, we find Jesus teaching his disciple what lies at the heart of prayer.

In Luke chapter 11, Jesus is teaching the disciples to have confidence in a compassionate God they can trust with their deepest concerns.

forgiveness. If you who are evil give good gifts to your children, Jesus tells them. How much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

[15:37] The church is sustained for the long haul by its trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, expressed in a life of prayer to our heavenly Father as Jesus taught us.

Again, here in Craig Lockhart, the time for prayer before the services on Sunday, the WhatsApp group sharing prayers for one another, the participation of church members in leading prayers in public worship, your own prayers at home and in your daily life, these are what sustain us as the church in this place.

Why? Because they express your trust in the God you know. Not any God, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a God whose love and mercy are without measure.

And so, beloved members and friends of Craig Lockhart Parish Church, we can be confident for the long haul as we devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching, our compelling story about Jesus.

We can be sure that we are the church for the long haul if we devote ourselves to fellowship, caring for one another like Jesus. We can be the church for the long haul if we break bread together in communion with Jesus.

[17:08] And we will be the church for the long haul if we pray together, trusting our Father in Jesus' name. And so, let us pray.

Lord Jesus, as on the day of Pentecost, pour out your Holy Spirit on this church that we too may be sustained for the long haul by your compelling story, your caring fellowship, your common meal, and our prayers to your compassionate Father in heaven.

Amen.