

Devoted to the Apostles' Teachings

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[0 : 00] We're going backwards through Acts now. I think we got to chapter 9 and now we're back in chapter 2. And the reason for that is I want to begin a series of three special sermons today looking at who we are as a community and where we are going under the title of Building a Community of Grace.

This week I celebrated my 11th year as Rector of St John's and I want to give thanks to God for His grace towards me and towards you and I'm thankful, I mean that, I'm thankful for your grace toward me as well.

And I cannot tell you what a privilege it is to teach the word of grace and be part with you in building the community of grace. But I almost always come away from preaching with a deep sense of frustration because I know that God's word is deeper and wider and richer and more wonderful than we have touched in the passage and this is nowhere more profoundly true than in the book of Acts where we see the risen Jesus Christ creating this new community and sustaining and sustaining and shaping and directing this new community from heaven.

And in October last year we flew over these last words in chapter 2 of Acts I wonder if you remember and we saw that there were three pivotal signs that Luke tells us marks the healthy church.

three essential characteristics of a church where Jesus Christ is at the centre three distinctive signs of a church filled with the Holy Spirit and I want to look at each of those over the next three weeks as we look at what it means to build a community of grace.

[2 : 00] I want to be very practical sometimes when you look when we look at what God's desire for his church is if you're in my shoes it's very easy to see the flaws but I want us not just to look to the future but I want to see how God's grace is at work and active now here amongst us and each week we are going to celebrate God's grace we are going to look at what God is doing amongst us and I want to recognise and honour people who are working in a number of different volunteer capacities and pray for and commission one another along the lines of these three essential marks.

Now you remember that the first two chapters in Acts are full of action. Chapter 1 begins with the risen Jesus Christ beginning the second phase of his ministry from heaven.

You remember that Jesus' ministry has two stages one here on earth and one in heaven and when Jesus goes back to be in heaven his ministry to us does not stop.

He remains our ruler and he remains present with us from heaven and right at the beginning of the book we are told that this new community is a community where Jesus is at work here and now that what defines us as a Christian community is that the risen Jesus Christ stands at the centre of our life.

He is here this morning the risen and glorified Christ that is why we worship together as we do. And then we fall into chapter 2 and the Holy Spirit descends from heaven like tongues of fire on the waiting disciples.

[3 : 55] God comes to dwell with his people. And do you remember when we looked at that passage we saw that Luke is straining to tell us this is an entirely new creation.

That the new community of the church is a creation from heaven indwelt by God centred on the person of Jesus Christ. That is why the church is so precious to God.

The church is at the heart and the centre of God's purposes for his world. It's not that God has a purpose for the world over here and the churches over here it is through the church that God works his purposes for the world.

We are the body of the living Christ who rules and saves. It is through the church that we are saved and we begin and join in saving others.

It is through the church that we are made like Jesus Christ together. Here we experience the presence of God and true community and true belonging and true connection and I wonder if that is your experience.

[5 : 08] I am not saying that church is meant to be like heaven. You know if you come to one of our welcoming groups that we have every couple of months we say to people the first thing we say about St John's is we are going to let you down.

We think it is very important to be honest about that first up because every church is a group of sinful people and St John's is a group of very sinful people. And yet we are a supernatural community.

We are people who have come alive to the reality of God and we gather together to meet with Jesus Christ and grow closer to him and grow closer to one another to develop bonds that are going to last for eternity and we find ourselves caught up in something exhilarating and larger than ourselves.

And when we come to the end of chapter 2 Luke stops and draws breath and stands back from this amazing new entity the church and he gives us the first and fullest summary of this new life in the new community and he wants us to see that this is the pattern that God intends for us.

So what are the three marks of a church where Christ is at the centre? Well the first one today is in verse 42 if you would look at it with me.

[6 : 35] And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching to the fellowship to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The first mark of a spirit-filled church is that it is a community of people who are devoted to the apostles' teaching.

Next week we will look at what it means to be devoted to the fellowship and the week after what it means to be devoted to mission. And we ought to expect that the first mark is being devoted to the apostles' teaching because it was through the preaching of Peter that this new group had come into existence.

It's perfectly natural that preaching and teaching should become the soul of the church. And Peter says that they were devoted to the apostles' teaching.

And the word means passionate and persistent. The word means taking deliberate and intentional effort even when there is resistance.

It means working with some intensity and some concentration besides or despite the difficulties that it may cause you.

[7 : 52] He's saying that that early group of Christians publicly identified with the proclamation of the gospel and privately were preoccupied with learning and studying the word of God.

And I wonder if you know what that is. I wonder if you have ever in your life taken the deliberate decision to mould your life and to shape your family around what the Bible teaches and not what the culture says.

I wonder if you've ever actually made that concrete decision. I wonder if you know what it is to read God's word and to come across something that you struggle with or that directly contradicts something that you feel and sense very deeply and you struggle with it and wrestle with it until you come to the place where you surrender before the word of God.

Don't get me wrong, Mark Twain once said, it's not the difficult bits I don't understand in the Bible that trouble me, it's the parts that I do understand. Some of us I think are still waiting for that grand special experience where we'll be swept away and everything will become effortless but the first mark of the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and lives is a deep spiritual hunger for truth and a willingness to do what it takes to learn and grow in that truth and the way in which the apostles' teaching comes to us today is through the words of the New Testament so that the mark of the Spirit at work in a Christian community is that we will be devoted to the word of God which has been written.

Now, I am aware that that is doubly difficult in our current context. If you look back over the last 20 centuries, the biggest change in Christianity compared to all the previous centuries has been in our attitude to the Bible.

[9 : 54] In the past, the Bible was regarded universally by Christians everywhere as God's reliable word.

What the Bible said, God said. But that is no longer true today. There has been a shift in trust and a shift in suspicion.

Instead of trusting God's word and suspecting myself, we now trust ourselves and are suspicious of what God says. And along with that has gone a shift in authority so that God's word is no longer the unquestioned authority in my life or in the life of the community of the church.

Now my experience is the authority and the word of God has to conform to my expectations. But the trouble is this, that Christianity will not survive where the Bible is not regarded and treated as God's book.

There is a word of prophecy for you which you can take. I'll say it again, Christianity will not survive where the Bible is not regarded as God's book.

[11 : 05] The institutions will survive, the Christian institutions will survive for hundreds of years, but not true life-giving faith. And the reason for that is that Christianity is a supernatural religion.

It requires a supernatural word from God telling us, revealing to us who he is, what his purposes are, and what the future is. And without a supernatural word from God it is impossible to take a supernatural view of the world or to continue to hope in Christ's coming again.

That's why the first mark of the spirit being at work in the life of a community is that we are devoted to the scriptures. That is how God reveals himself to us, shows us his character.

That is how he calls us into fellowship with himself and with one another and saves us through his word. The way in which God creates a community of grace, sustains us by his grace, calls us back to his grace, is through this book.

And it was written by many different people in different times and in different cultures but the consistent claim of the scriptures is that the true author is God the Holy Spirit.

[12 : 24] That is why when we teach the Bible we hear God's word taught. I want to just show you how this works. If you turn back in Acts to chapter 1 for a moment you can see this is exactly what the apostles believed and taught.

Chapter 1 verse 16. Here is the apostle Peter standing up in front of the 120 and he says this, brethren, brothers and sisters, the scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas and then he quotes from two psalms.

In other words, the apostle Peter quotes words that were written a thousand years ago, words which King David wrote using his own language and his own idiom and his own style and his own experiences and yet according to the apostle Peter, these words were words that the Holy Spirit spoke through David.

This is exactly Jesus' view of the Bible. Turn back to Matthew chapter 19 for a moment. On page 19. It's very interesting, you know, we run over these texts as we work through the Bible but we, they're very instructive for us.

Here in Matthew 19 verses 4 and 5 the Pharisees are arguing with Jesus about marriage. And Jesus answered in verse 4, Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female and said, that is God said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.

[14 : 15] Now that text comes from Genesis chapter 2 and it is not a direct quote from God, it is a quote of a comment by the author of Genesis.

And Jesus says that that comment by the author of Genesis has its author in God. Let me show you another text, turn across to Matthew 22 for a moment.

Verse 31, again on marriage. Verse 31, Jesus says, As for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God?

Then he quotes Exodus, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Very interesting. You see, in Jesus' view, it is the written words and not just the events or the thoughts behind them that are the words of God.

It is the sentences of scripture, the propositions of scripture that Jesus thinks is the word of God. And secondly, the words that were written in the past continue to be God's word to us now.

[15 : 29] In other words, the ancient words that were recorded thousands of years before are not just revelation in the past, they are revelation in the present. Let me show you one more text. Let's turn over to Hebrews chapter 3, verse 7 on page 204.

I didn't share this text with a nine o'clock congregation because they were more convinced than you are seemingly. In verse 7 and 8 and 9 and 10, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95, the tough part of Psalm 95, which lots of Anglican prayer books leave out for some reason.

But look at the introduction and formula in verse 7. Therefore, he says, as the Holy Spirit says, present tense, quotes words written a thousand years before. In other words, not only are the words the words of David, ultimately they're the words of the Spirit, not only did the words the Spirit say those words, but he says them now. And the very quote points to that today when you hear his voice, etc. That is why Jesus says the Scripture cannot be broken. That is why he says heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

[16:54] You know, the French philosopher and atheist Voltaire proclaimed that within 25 years of his life, the Bible would be forgotten and a thing of the past.

And 40 years after his death in 1778, the Bible Society bought his home and began printing Bibles there. Well, the first priority for us is to be devoted to the Word of God, the Apostles' teaching. And I want to apply this to us this morning in three areas. Firstly, I want to apply this to each of us in our own private sphere. Would you turn back with me to Psalm 1 for a moment?

Psalm 1. Let me just read the first three verses. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord. And on his law he meditates day and night. He's like a tree. Planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in its season, its leaf does not wither.

[18:12] In all he does he prospers. David tells us that the core of the life of blessing is to delight in the law of the Lord and to meditate on it day and night.

And the use of the law in this context means God's instruction, God's Word, what we would call the Scriptures. and the life of blessing comes to us not as we resent God's Word, but as we delight in it. And that that attitude of delight demonstrates itself in two very concrete actions. The first is that we meditate on God's Word day and night. It's a very different thing from meditation that you read about in Western Living, what are those common grounds, you know those kinds, I read those magazines.

The West Coast view of meditation is that you empty your mind, focus on a spot and say a mantra over and over to lift your consciousness. That's not biblical meditation.

The word literally means to matter and we are to take a part of scripture and to turn it over and over again, trying to understand it and work it into our hearts.

[19:33] So the biblical meditation is not the career and vocation of some elite group of Christians. It is for all who want to enter the path of blessing, not just once a day but twice a day.

Isn't that interesting? And the second activity is breaking away from sin. Meditation has no use whatsoever if we are practicing sin.

we have got to not walk in the way of the sinner. Because you see meditating on God's word is demanding, not intellectually it can be but more morally and spiritually.

You cannot understand God's word unless you love the truth and have a humble heart and are willing to do what God says for you and me to do. The psalmist says there are fundamentally two different ways of living, walking in the way of the sinner or walking in the path of blessing, delighting in God's word, devoting ourselves to God's word.

And when we do we are like a tree that does not wither. And when the heat is on and the wind blows and when the drought is on the tree stays green.

[20:47] Not because of its natural resources but it's able to transcend its circumstances resources because it has a supply of living water.

So let me just pause here and say if you are feeling dry and withered in your own spiritual life the question to ask is what are your habits privately in being devoted to the word of God?

Is it something that you delight in and meditate in day and night? Are you turning away from and repenting of all sin? you're allowing the roots of God's word to take deep foundation in the soil of your own heart?

If you feel your life is not fruitful ask the same question. See if we leave the study of the Bible to other people we cannot grow as Christians and I want to challenge every one of you today to make it part of your daily practice to seek to read God's word or to find a way to have that happen for you. It's the natural mark of the Holy Spirit being at work in our hearts. He doesn't make us interested in his word. He makes us devoted to it. And this morning over at Coffee we're going to have coffee after the 11 this morning there's a bookstore with a number of resources that you might have a look at for private use for use in your families.

[22 : 15] Did you know there's someone in the congregation who prepares a three month reading guide through the Bible which we use to some effect in our own family. So that's privately.

Let me make a second and brief application to small groups. If you go back to the second chapter of Acts you discover that the early church not only gathered in a large group but they also gathered from house to house.

And in those house fellowships they found that that was a great way to grow as students of God's word. It's very difficult isn't it in this sort of congregation. If you've got a question burning on your mind or you missed the last point or you profoundly disagree with what the preacher is saying to stand up and say just a minute it has happened.

that's one of the reasons we encourage everyone at St. John's to be part of a small group Bible study. It may be fearful for some of us but in our small groups we seek to give prime place in our life to the Bible because it's through small group Bible studies primarily that we equip one another to exercise our own ministries.

The very fact that God has given us his word is an act of grace and the word itself is a word of grace and through it he creates community. If you want to know God's work in your life join up with a small group and thirdly and finally let me make application to our public gathering.

[23 : 57] Since the days of Sinai the way in which God has met with his people is through his word. At the heart of our weekly gatherings while I remain your minister is an exposition of God's word.

This is how he reveals himself. This is how Christ remains central. The study of God's word and the teaching of God's word is at the core of the New Testament picture of ministry.

So when we choose our pastoral staff we choose people who are skilled in God's word and able to teach. When we elect our leaders as a congregation we must pray for those who are enlightened by and controlled by God's word and God's priorities.

As we make decisions as a congregation small and large about our future about priorities and ministries and budgets we must ensure that our decisions demonstrate a growing trust in and submission to the word of God.

I think we are at one of the most exciting and challenging times in the history of St. John's. It's certainly not dull. People are coming to faith and people are growing in the faith and God's hand is upon us.

[25 : 16] We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to many people for the sacrifices they have made and continue to make and the ministries in which they serve. And our task brothers and sisters is to make sure that we build as God would have us build.

Not through techniques or programs but through the apostolic preoccupations of being devoted to his word, growing in the depths of scripture, walking with God, loving him and loving one another. That is what it is to build a community of grace. Amen.