

New Community

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to be with you in church here this morning and to connect with you online as well. If you've not met me before, my name's Steve Jeffrey. I'm the senior pastor here at St Paul's, and it's my joy to be able to connect us into the next stage of the book of Acts, which we're journeying through at the moment.

Very few, I think, would argue about the quality of community has declined in society in recent years.

In fact, not just recent years, over quite a number of years. In fact, one of the biggest social issues in our community here in Chatswood is, in fact, social isolation, as it is for many people in large cities around the world.

There is, if you like, a superficiality to our personal relationships. But it's not new. In 1955, in his book, *The Sane Society*, Eric Fromm, who was a social psychologist, wrote this.

There is not much love to be found in the world of our day. There is rather a superficial friendliness concealing a distance, an indifference, and a subtle distrust.

[1 : 18] The radical psychologist R.D. Lang wrote in his 1967 book, *The Politics of Experience*, we are born into a world where social isolation awaits us.

Before we can even ask such optimistic questions as what is a personal relationship, we have to ask if personal relationships are even possible in this present situation.

So how do we react when we hear phrases like that? When we hear things like superficial friendliness and social isolation and emotional isolation, words like that.

These are real issues in our society, in our community. And in fact, it may be for you personally right now, whether maybe even you sitting at home right now, all alone, watching, engaging with this.

I think it's an issue which we've become more aware of. I'm certainly hearing statements and phrases like feeling disconnected in this COVID-19 season.

[2 : 24] We live in a sick society that desperately needs to discover this idea of community and connectedness and relationship.

There is a sign of hope for us. The opening chapters of Acts points us to such a community. It's a special community.

It's called many things, but most frequently in the New Testament, it's called the church. So we're going to journey today to see what it is. What is this church?

So if you've got the St. Paul's app, you can open up and you'll see an outline. I've got four things. It was going to be five, but I've narrowed it down to four because the fifth thing was addressed last week.

So four things in Acts chapter 4 verse 32 through to chapter 6 verse 7. So if you haven't got the St. Paul's app, at the very least, you can open up a Bible and follow along with me on this one.

[3 : 21] There's four things about this new community. It's a saved community. It's an organic and gracious community. It's a disciplined community. And it's an organized community.

They're the four things. So first of all, and foundationally and fundamentally, this new community is a saved community. In Acts chapter 2, we saw it a couple of weeks ago.

It's the day of Pentecost. The apostle Peter gives his first and his greatest sermon, an experience that most preachers don't ever have. His first and his greatest sermon.

And he gets to the application of this sermon in verse 36 of Acts 2. So have a look at that. Skip back a couple of chapters for me. It says, Therefore, this is his application. Therefore, let all of Israel be assured of this.

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. And there's a multitude that are gathered there listening to this sermon from across the Roman Empire, all different cultures and

languages.

[4 : 23] And it says they were convicted. They came under deep conviction. Conviction both of their own sin and of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

And so they said, Peter, what are we going to do now? What happens now? And Peter called the gathering to repent and to be baptized. And what Luke concludes, he concludes a description of that day by adding in verse 40 of chapter 2, with many other words, he, that's Peter, warned them. And he pleaded with them, save yourselves from this corrupt generation. And those who accepted his message were baptized and about 3,000 were added to their number that day.

Notice what Peter does is he warns them. He pleads with them to be saved. That's the essential thing that they need to do is to be saved.

And he declares in another sermon he gives, which is also pretty good, in chapter 4, verse 12, Peter says, So what Peter's talking about there in Acts 4, and the same experience in Acts 2, is that what he's talking about is not some kind of optional spiritual experience, but about a radical moral rescue, which all of humanity must experience, lest they perish under the judgment of their creator God.

[6 : 19] That's what he's talking about. Jesus Christ is the resurrected, death-defeating, sin-crushing, relationship with our creator-restoring, Lord of the universe.

He sits enthroned as king, never to be challenged. No greater authority, and therefore no other alternative, no other rescue plan.

And what Peter says here is, in Acts 2 and in Acts 4, you neglect Jesus at your peril.

He's saying there is a must about Jesus. Not a maybe, it's a must. Jesus Christ is the most important thing that has happened in the history of the world.

And what you saw in Acts 2, if you sort of tuned in a little bit to the language of what Peter uses, is that Peter divides the world into two groups.

[7 : 27] Only two. He says, save yourself from something. Save yourself from a particular community. This corrupt generation.

You are part of a group, a community. And he says, save yourself from that community that lives as if the God of this universe doesn't matter. As if Jesus isn't King and Lord of the universe.

As if he isn't the Messiah. Save yourself from that community and join a new community. A new society. A new group. Saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And what Peter declares, and as the New Testament declares, in fact, what the whole Bible declares, what Christianity declares, is there's only two groups of people. You're either in one corrupt group that rejects God or you're in the group that has been saved by Jesus Christ.

On either community. And so for the early Christians in Acts, being saved by Jesus was a matter of leaving a community under judgment to finding refuge and joy and hope and life and forgiveness and new salvation in the community of those who have been saved by Jesus Christ.

[8 : 46] Christians are bound together as a new people because of our common salvation.

There is no such thing as isolated, go it alone, choose my journey, my commitment levels, Christianity. I do not get an option. It is not up to me to choose what I think level of commitment I will give and won't give.

Those are the defining things of the corrupt generation, not the new community under the Lordship of Jesus. And Christians are bound together as a new people because of a common salvation.

They have a new common salvation and that common salvation trumps everything because there's not much else that they necessarily have in common. But it's enough. Chapter 4, verse 32, all the believers were one in heart and mind.

They were made up of believers. This new community is made up of believers who differed in opinions on a whole range of different things. Who to vote for? Not that they did it back in those days, but who to vote for?

[9 : 53] Food, clothing, language, customs, all kinds of different personal opinions. They were, however, united in one fundamental, most important thing that rose above every other difference and that is that Jesus is Lord of all and he's the Messiah who saved us.

We make him the main thing. We are bound together because of our common salvation. 1982, British Airways Boeing 747-200 was flying at a very high altitude.

You know, your cruising altitude over Indonesia flying to New Zealand, I think from memory. And what the crew could not see as they were flying the plane was this cloud of volcanic ash right in

their flight path.

Mount Galganan in Indonesia had erupted just days before and there's this huge cloud of volcanic ash which back in those days were not picked up on radar and then when the plane flew through the volcanic ash, what it did was, was in a couple of minutes clogged up all four of its engines and shut them down.

So this 747 became a, what is technically a glider now and it was gliding in the air. You can imagine the silence of this for 16 minutes.

[11 : 25] 16 minutes, no, under no power whatsoever and descending at a kilometre per minute. Or something like that.

Every certain minutes. Fast anyway. Most people sitting on that plane in that moment were convinced they were going to die. They grabbed bits of paper and pens as they could and scrawled notes to family members in the hope that in the wreckage those notes would be found.

Amazingly, because of a fluke thing that the captain did in that moment in deciding to descend faster, which is against all logic, actually the descent going faster unclogged the engines which allowed him to restart the motor.

It is now, you can look it up, it is now in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest unpowered flight by an aircraft not designed to fly unpowered.

Now, if you are sitting on that plane in that moment when after 16 minutes of silence all of a sudden, boom, the engines kick in, the excitement, you start gaining altitude and eventually you land safely.

[12 : 38] You have a new lease on life. Everything changes in that moment. And so what did the passengers on this plane do? They formed a club. It's known as the Galganan Gliding Club.

The Galganan Gliding Club. They get together annually on the date of the flight and they celebrate life together. That's what they do.

That's their whole existence, to celebrate a new lease on life. To be saved by Jesus is to be a member of his saved community.

Church is not what you attend. Church is what you belong to. Church is who you are. You now have been redefined. Saved into the new community of the saved.

Secondly, we see that this new community that has been graciously saved by the Lord Jesus Christ becomes an organically gracious community under the power of the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 39] Verse 32 again. No one, this is this new community, no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own. But they shared everything that they had.

Then down in verse 34, there was no needy persons among them for from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, bought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet. And it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levi from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, sold a field that he owned and bought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

This is not an early form of communism. That's not what's going on here. Did you notice the high degree of voluntary commitment that these believers displayed towards each other?

Voluntary commitment. Private ownership was recognised, but no one pressed their rights to private ownership. This is spontaneous.

[14 : 53] It is extraordinary generosity. It's organic. It's not structured, not planned. There's no sell your property campaign going on here. There's no campaign by the apostles. Their sharing was selfless, it was sacrificial and it was voluntary.

There's no law imposing these standards. This is simply a desire that has grown in them because of the work of the Holy Spirit in their life and God's radical generosity to them in the Lord Jesus.

This is a church that has a social conscience. It didn't appear to be a strategy for growth. It was simply an organic, spontaneous expression of the love of the Holy Spirit had poured into their hearts.

And what's more, crucially, there is no evidence that the early church confused this ministry, this ministry of meeting people's needs with the evangelistic task in which Jesus had given them to proclaim the good news to all peoples to the ends of the earth.

No confusion. Verse 33, right in the middle of all this, with great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

[16 : 10] Resurrection truth is the key to this new community. The historical bodily resurrection of Jesus means that everything that Jesus declared about his identity as God and all of his saving

plans are for humanity and his lordship over all the universe are right.

They're right. He's vindicated. And this early church didn't substitute social action with proclaiming that truth.

Nor did they merge social action with proclaiming that truth. they preached the love of God in Jesus Christ in the context of a community that had demonstrated the love practically.

They'd been captivated by the gospel and it overflowed in their life together. Thirdly, this new community is a disciplined community.

Up until now, the picture that we have of the church is love and spontaneity and organic life. This is really attractive for those who prefer church to be free from regulations and budgets and structures and organisation and strategic plans and just to be free to come and go as we please and just spontaneous to where the spirit might lead us.

[17 : 38] Some love the language of organism as a church and particularly push back against it's not an organisation it's an organism as if those two things are the polar opposites.

It's true the church is an organism it is a living thing. It's certainly not a machine and it's not a company it's not a business but while Christ's body like our human body is not a machine that does not mean that there's no order or control.

We all have what they call a central nervous system. Central nervous system. Our bodies are not random collections of limbs each doing their own thing randomly.

The church is not modelled on the precise movements of a computerised robot nor on the haphazard antics of a mentally deranged monkey.

Organisation and discipline are no substitute for life but they are indispensable an indispensable condition for effective living.

[18 : 57] A healthy church is an organised disciplined organism and ironically it was the organic spontaneous welfare of the early church that highlighted the importance of its discipline and its organisation.

Have a look chapter 5 verse 1 Now a man named Ananias together with his wife Sapphira also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself but bought the rest at the apostles feet.

So this incident brought the issue of discipline to a head for the early church. How the church dealt with this moment of corruption and sin was vital for its long-term effectiveness as a new community. There is a need for discipline and for standards in God's new community unless it would degenerate into something which is no different from the corrupt community from which it has been saved.

In verse 4 Peter points out that Ananias and Sapphira were under no obligation whatsoever to sell their field nor were they required to donate all the proceeds of the field to the church which leads me to believe that their motive in this behaviour is not greed they're not driven by greed here they're not forced to do this it's most likely that they were motivated by jealousy or the coveting of reputation the coveting of reputation being seen by others and praised by others so it's quite possible it's narcissistic behaviour at the end of chapter four we see Barnabas did the same thing that he sold the property gave it all to the apostles and he received a whole lot of praise for it

[21 : 11] I can imagine he's been held up people look to him he's a model disciple fantastic work people are encouraged to give a new name the son of encouragement and I would suggest that Ananias and Sapphira wanted the reputation that Barnabas had they loved the applause that he received they wanted to be known as philanthropists too they wanted to be ranked with Barnabas in the esteem of the Christian community but they wanted both the money and the esteem and so they hatched a plot a deception in an attempt to fool the church and God but they were wrong verse 4 this is Peter what made you think of doing such a thing you have not lied just to human beings but to God himself when Ananias heard this he fell down dead immediately just like his wife now the savageness of this judgment shocks many

Christians today it also shocked the early community it says great fear seized them not just the Christians in the community but the surrounding community who were not there Christians looking at the Christian community great fear seized them as well and yet it did not hinder the progress of the gospel it's possible that Luke had in mind here the similar incident in the book of Joshua in the Old Testament we read in Joshua chapter 7 that of Achan who stole some treasure from Jericho which was supposed to be dedicated to God he steals it hides it under his tent and as a result the

Israelite community was suffering defeat after defeat after defeat in battle and Joshua goes to God in the ark of the covenant and prays to God what are you doing the glory of your name is going to be hindered here the more that we suffer defeat people are going to laugh at us and they're going to laugh at you the advance of your kingdom is going to be hindered here and God be true to your name resolve the problem and there's

Joshua get up it's not my problem it's yours there's sin in the community I haven't broken my promises you guys have broken yours there's sin in your community and this is right at the very beginning as the people of God cross over the Jordan river and start as the new community people in their new home very similar situation here in the book of Acts as this new community begins as the new community of God's people what happened in Joshua 7 is the deception is discovered Achan and his family are executed for their crime against God and all their possessions burnt and their name wiped out their name's wiped out and the point of Joshua 7 and the point of Acts 5 here is that we are a disciplined community to fulfill the purpose that God has for his saved community they must maintain a much higher standard of conduct than is tolerated in the world around us and so it is a dreadful thing when the church has as an institution the stain that it has they have wandered far away from being the community of

God's people and under the lordship of Jesus God's people must be different their moral standards must be maintained we have been saved from one corrupt generation being made in the image of the Lord Jesus and so therefore personal and corporate holiness absolutely matters to every local church and so at the beginning of this new community as it was in Joshua 7 and now in Acts 5 an example is made of God's priorities God will not have the purity of his church adulterated by hypocrisy now sometimes there are anxiety prone Christians who accuse themselves of hypocrisy unnecessarily that is

I think it is natural for when the spirit of God is working in your life that you become aware of the sinfulness that's in your life and when we become aware of our sinfulness and become acutely aware of our sinfulness is that we can question our place amongst God's people do we belong here am I a hypocrite because I've identified sin hypocrisy is different hypocrisy is a deliberate pretense it's deliberately pretending to be something that you are not you see what makes this incident in Acts 5 so serious is the deceit that made this crime so horrendous open deceit attempt to fool God and to fool others in the church there is no expectation of perfection the church is a hospital for sinners it's not a shop window for ready made angels the one thing the church does have a right though to is to expect that every member be honest about where they are in their relationship with God that's what we should expect it is those who cloak their sin under the mask of moral respectability that the church must discipline and keep a watch out over each other for the church must discipline now I'm glad that we have a core value that addresses this issue specifically but as a value it's got to be practiced it's got to shape the culture for us here at

[27 : 54] St Paul's it's got to be written not just on our walls but in our hearts as well it's called humble authenticity because we are a saved community at the very least what that should tell us is that we needed saving from something that should humble us to know that this plan of God's salvation is so grand because our problem is so deep we can't fix it ourselves that nothing less than the creator God had to jump in and solve it that should break your heart humble authenticity says that as a church we are committed to communicating in large and small group settings with honesty authenticity and transparency and being vulnerable with our imperfections that encourage candor and not concealment that's the community that we hold ourselves up to so lastly so we're a saved community an organic and gracious community a disciplined community and lastly we're an organised community hot on the heels of the first discipline place for the church is the first business meeting in

Acts chapter 6 now this section in Acts 6 begins with a reference to growth in verse 1 it says now in these days when the disciples were increasing and then if you jump right to the end of it in verse 7 it says and the word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith so what is sandwiched between those two statements where the growth of the church is documented and celebrated are two threats there's two threats two threats to the effectiveness of the church's mission and also how both those threats were overcome so the first threat is the more obvious one it's the conflict between the Greek speaking Jews and the Aramaic speaking Jews there's a major tension point for the early church the Greek speaking

Jews weren't quite culturally at home with the the real Jews you know the the Aramaic speaking Jews the full blooded Jews there was a great rivalry even though they both sat in the Jewish camp they were both there's a great rivalry between these two cultures Jewish cultures they had their own churches their own synagogues that they met in they weren't connected together when the gospel hits town when Jesus and the good news of salvation him hits town the church the new community is formed from both of those groups both those groups become one in the new church the new community the early church is a multi-ethnic and economically diverse church and the tragedy here in Acts 6 is the cultural rivalry the cultural rivalry was perpetuated within the new community that Jesus had established and the apostles were on it they could rightly see that the corporate witness of the church and the spread of the word of

God was at stake here if people weren't cared for and the murmuring continued then the church would come into disrepute that's the first threat to the spread of the word of God the second threat to the church's mission is even bigger than that threat and it's not as obvious in the text the second threat is solving the first threat in the wrong way that's the second threat and it seems to me that Luke thinks that the second threat is actually bigger than the first threat and I say that because the way that he links verse 2 the word of God and the word of God in verse 7 in verse 2 he quotes the apostles as saying that leaving the ministry of the word of God would be a mistake and in verse 7 he reports in fact

I would suggest he celebrates the impact of the apostles not leaving the word of God the word of God spread the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith his point is that the word of God kept spreading and bearing fruit because the apostles did not make the strategic mistake of leaving their calling to fix a pressing pastoral problem he is saying here that it is so right that the apostles focus stayed on the ministry of the word and prayer the major threat to the church's mission is whatever threatens the word of God spreading so what the apostles do is they delegate the ministry of meeting the needs to a group and they focus themselves on their primary calling now there is no hint in Acts at all there is no hint that the apostles the ministry of the food distribution was somehow below them not even a hint of that there is not even a hint that the apostles didn't love or care for the widows because they did not distribute the food personally not even the widows complained about the apostles not distributing the food personally in fact it seems that the widows and the whole church were satisfied their care had been offered under the leadership of the apostles even though it wasn't the apostles doing it personally so the quick issue here for us is entirely a question of calling this is a vital principle for us as a church

[34 : 26] God calls all of his saved new community to be people in the ministry all of us he calls different people to different ministries each calling and ministry is to work together to in order for in order that the word of God would increase and spread and the new community grow that's God's agenda and Luke celebrates the solution of the apostles the two threats are overcome both were utterly crucial either of these threats could have undermined the church and ended its amazing growth and the solution here was the diversity of gifting diversity of calling working together to see the influence of the word of God spread that's the way we organise the pursuit of our vision here at St Paul's pursuit of our vision our ministry is that we are staff led we are parish council guided and we are church member enacted everyone involved in the community in order to see the word of

God spread and increase that is you've heard me say this before we are not the manly ferry where there's a few people on the boat doing the key jobs to get us from point A to B and the rest of us are sitting there reading our phones scrolling through the phones reading the taken photos we are not the manly ferry we are more akin to a yacht in the Hobart yacht race on boxing day everyone on board has a vital part to play there are no passengers if you are a passenger you manage to stay away you get tossed overboard we cannot cope with extra weight we're a racing yacht with everyone has a vital part to play all different but all crucial in order to achieve the goal of seeing God's new community grow the word of God increase and spread so let me just say if you're a Christian you have a crucial part to play in

God's eternal plan of his new community I've got to keep coming back to this again and again and again your life is so much bigger than a good job an understanding spouse non-delinquent kids good friends and active social life it is so much bigger than beautiful gardens and nice holidays and fashionable clothes you are part of something immense something that began before you were born something that will continue long after you die God is rescuing fallen scattered sinful humanity

the corrupt generation he's rescuing people from one generation one community into a new community of saved people that will be his community of people forever and he's shaping us into the image of his much loved son the Lord Jesus Christ for his glory he gathers you to himself to his new society his new community so that you might pursue his agenda for time and eternity let's pray father God we ask that you would please pour out your holy spirit now upon us your people to give us hearts to hear and to do your word and to meet each other's needs would you also build this church and overcome the obstacles to the spread of the word of God the good news of salvation in Jesus

Christ grant that there would be such liberty and such freedom and such anointing and obedience and holiness that your word does not return void but instead spreads and you are glorified forever in Jesus name come now and do your work amongst us and continue to do your work and shape us as your new community amen