

Acts 2:42-47

Last year I went to a book launch in Salisbury. Book launches are a bit odd, you stand around holding a glass of prosecco that is not quite cold enough, talking to people you don't very well about a book none of you have read.

This book launch was unusual. The author was there to talk about his new book and the author was dying. Terminally ill, he told us about his new book which was all about the way we keep Holy Week and Easter in church, the liturgies we use, the readings we hear. And his book starts with a story about him. He was Vicar of Poole in the 1990s and he was taking Holy week services. Twenty-five miles away in Dorchester his father was dying. That week he moved between all those services measuring out the death of Christ and his father's bedside. He gave his father what he describes as his *last earthly communion* on Easter Day. His Father died on Easter Monday.

The author of the book was Michael Perham, my Bishop when I worked in Gloucester. My friend. My teacher. I am Dean of Bristol thanks to his guidance and his support. In the strangest symmetry he did his dying in Holy Week this year. I drove down to see him after our Three Hours. He had his last earthly communion on Easter Sunday. He died on Easter Monday. I preached at his funeral yesterday.

And I said this,

He loved the church, he wanted us to be church... We need to learn, with Michael, to love the church, because he saw this as our common life, the theatre of redemption and the platform of our hope. Here we can be what we should be.

I have got Michael whispering in my ear this morning. He taught me something about church and church, as luck would have it, is the subject of that reading from Acts.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Now, a bit of background on Acts. Read Acts and you will find you are reading a lot of sermons, Peter preaching after the resurrection, Peter at Pentecost, Peter at the Temple, Paul before the Areopagus. And these sermons have a recurring theme. They say, they *keep saying*, that *this* has become *that*. So, just before the passage we heard, Peter has stood up, full of the Holy Spirit, and has said

this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel Acts 2:16

'Look at this', he is saying, 'Look at what you see. All these people talking in foreign languages, all this confidence all this joy. Look at this.' 'This' he says, 'is what the prophets promised'. *This is that.*

You have to picture Peter standing in front of you asking you to look around you, asking you to look at the person in front that you don't know, to look at me standing up here, to look at the flowers and the choir all these things familiar and strange and see if only for a

moment that all this is that. All this is the promise of God, the beginning of glory, the gate of heaven. That is what Peter was saying. That is what Michael Perham understood.

God breaks in to his world. We struggle to see it, but at Easter God has got hold of life and death, got hold of the cross and the crowd, the passion and the pain, and declared 'All this is mine'. We struggle to see that, we really struggle, but this world is the gate of glory.

And church is where we practice that. Michael used to say that we come to church to 'play at heaven'. In Acts Peter preached the coming of the Kingdom and just after that we get our first description of the church. The one we heard this morning

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There are four things you do if you are going to be church properly, really. There are four things that help make *this* into *that*.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. First of all, the Church must have teaching. Not because we need to make it complicated, but so we can keep it simple, put deep things into words. The Church is teaching because Christian living is all about being one thing, myself, a sinner, and becoming another thing becoming like Christ. Teaching is formation the steady business of becoming a bit less like me and a bit more like him

And, secondly, the church is fellowship. That's a word that gets a bit of a drubbing. You are, most of you, nicer than me, so maybe, you cope better than me... but when I go to a church and someone tells me 'We are going to have a time of fellowship', I get downcast. They mean someone is going to put an arm around me and pray a prayer which is nearly, but not quite about the things that matter to me. Fellowship in the Church of England too often looks like quiche and anxiety. The fellowship of the apostles plunged them into bitter arguments that never, in the end, divided them. Fellowship had them arguing about practice and priority and belief. Fellowship was loyalty to the death. Fellowship was the absolute conviction that they were most themselves when they were together. Fellowship was for life and beyond death.

They devoted themselves to... the breaking of bread. So, thirdly, the church is the breaking of the bread. That is, the church is eucharist. I am not sure we say this quite often enough, or loud enough. This service, we come to each Sunday, the bread the wine, the empty hands, it is not just our principal service, the best thing we do. This is what God does. It is Christ who presides here. This is what he did for us, this is Calvary, this is the spilt blood and the broken body. That is the point. The church has to be Eucharist because eucharist means *thanksgiving* and we are here to say thank you because Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves: shown us how to be human, opened the gates of heaven.

And lastly the church is prayer. My friend and my Bishop was strong on eucharist and strong on prayer. He had prayers he knew and he used all the time, he had people he prayed for constantly. Prayer is not nearly as complicated as we try to make it, it is just the business of trying to stitch heaven and earth together, looking for God here, lifting this up

to God. We all do that differently but that is how we wedge open the door, it is how we keep our faith alive.

Church is teaching, fellowship, eucharist and prayer. Church is this turning into that, your life and mine becoming the stuff that heaven is made of. It is playing at heaven. It is very, very important. It is not duty, or moral improvement. Church is where we practice being what we should be. Church is where we imagine what we could become. Bishop Michael taught me that, he is still teaching me that. He knew that we should take delight in this, church should be joyful, full of all the glory and hope of Easter.

And that is probably enough to be getting on with this morning. But there is one more thing to say. In the church described in Acts, you may have noticed,

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

The scholars read this passage and look at us over the top of their spectacles. They tell us that the apostles sharing their disposable goods. That is what the Greek text says. They did not sell their houses and make a new kind of state. They did share things; they did provide for those in need. The apostles knew that riches must be shared.

And we need to notice that.

A week ago the deans, nearly forty of them, were in London for our annual Conference. We went to *The Times* Newspaper, to the Corporation of the City of London, to a charity working with adolescent victims of knife crime and we went to JP Morgan. On the 31st floor of their building, on Canary Wharf, all London lies at your feet. There are all kinds of stories that you can tell about those days in London. The one you cannot tell is a story about riches being shared. Of course there is wonderful charity going on and God be praised for that. But it is not nearly enough.

I have just seen a House of Commons briefing paper, it is not a week old. Income inequality is higher in the UK than in most European countries. The very rich are getting richer and although the measurements are complex and contested the general view is that the income gap is likely to wider. The old are doing better than the young. The 4th January this year was named 'Fat Cat Wednesday' because, on that day, it was calculated that the average FTSE 100 boss earned more than £1,000 an hour. That means that they earn the UK's average annual salary in slightly less than three days.

The church does not look like that. There is a fifth quality of church and it declares, it insists that the Kingdom we long for is a place of justice and equity. It does not look like the world we are making around us. We have a duty to pray heaven and earth together, we have a duty to make the world more just.

Bishop Michael taught me that church matters, we are here to be joyful, we have an Easter hope. But there is a deep seriousness in being church because here we look for heaven and we see how far we have still to go.