

Part of something amazing!

Reading: Acts 2:42-47

*'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.'*

1. When you page through the history of the Christian church, there are, as we all know, things we are not proud of. The church has, unfortunately, not always been a good representative of God's reign. Even so, we know that these episodes are not the norm and that they are deviations from what the church should be. When you look at the church when it is healthy, you see the real thing. Stories of the church in good health makes me realize that it is the most amazing movement to be part of. We are so used to being members of the church that we have lost our sense of astonishment at it. We are part of something much, much bigger than ourselves, much bigger than anything else we participate in.

It all started in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit filled the small group of disciples after Jesus' resurrection appearances, and it expanded with explosive power. In less than 300 years, this tiny group, followers of a leader in a small and insignificant province of the Roman empire, became the dominant social group in the empire. There was a vibrancy to the first church that made it flourish under conditions of persecution and in the face of state-sponsored and well-established traditional religions. They impressed the people in the places where they were planted with their lifestyle and the answers they offered to the greatest social ills of the time. The story of the church in the first three centuries is an inspiration. And it did not stop there. From that small band of followers of Jesus Christ emerged a movement that is present all over the world today.

But in the almost-2000-year-long history of the Christian church, there have been ebbs and flows. The church has been subject to the almost inevitable ailment of all human movements. Starting off with individuals, it becomes a movement, and then calcifies into monuments that have lost their essence and vitality, in which a shrinking number of frustrated committed individuals struggle to right the boat. It gets bogged down by unbending traditions, rules and administrative structures. The church has constantly found itself in a place where it has had to renew itself or die. But by the grace of God, by the power of the Spirit, here it is to this day. The Holy Spirit is present even in the darkest days of the church and stirs it to life again and again.

2. The church in the Western world is at a place where we need to be revitalised once more. I don't think I need to elaborate on this. We in SALU, specifically, are at a very critical juncture in our history. The kinds of decisions we as a congregation and as a session face are probably the most important decisions we have had to take for a very long time. The future of the church will be determined by what we do in response to the Presbytery Plan when it is finally approved. We might make decisions that will lead to the end of the congregation as we know it, but lead to a new era of flourishing. We might also make decisions that would lead to a temporary extension of the congregation as we know it, but an unavoidable bleeding of life from it until it dies a natural

death. We might simply see the members getting older and fewer until we peter out and the lights are turned off for a final time.

Those are the two extremes; there are several other possibilities in between. We will need great wisdom and much prayer to find God's will. We should not imagine that our decisions are merely about church buildings – whether we should relocate into the village or keep our buildings where they are. There is a deeper and far greater challenge we face. We must first, before considering anything else, ask ourselves how we should be a healthy church in the future – a church that can be seen as a true representative of the kingdom of God. *Only then* should we ask how our buildings can serve us in this endeavour.

3. So, how do we see to it that our congregation is a healthy one? The knee-jerk reaction of modern people is to launch new programmes and new initiatives. Congregations are rated by the amount of activity they generate. The minister and the leadership are expected to do some new things that will bring people in. 'Don't just sit there; do something!' is the standard rallying cry. And, yes, this is a necessary part of the answer to the kind of challenge we are facing. Handwringing will not get us anywhere. A healthy church is an active church, much as a healthy body is physically mobile and active.

But what are the kinds of activities that we find in a healthy church? Activities often amount to no more than window-dressing – intended to impress instead of being an expression of the health of the church, or generating health. Like an unhealthy body, an unhealthy church will struggle to produce much in the line of activities and programmes to serve its Lord. So, what are the vital signs of health in a church?

This is where we do well to take a good look at the first Christian community that Luke describes in Acts. Acts is not the story of the successful missionary endeavours of a number of heroic and able people like Peter and Paul. It is the story of a growing and healthy church – the first church, and the many churches that came into being as a result of God's work through this first Christian congregation.

We should also take account of the fact that Luke is writing for the church a good 50 years after the emergence of this first Christian church. He is not only writing to give an accurate historic account; he is writing to help them understand the essence of being a Christian church. He describes the elements of church life so we can learn from them, to take us towards greater health as a church. They are the vital signs a church exhibits when it is healthy.

In the coming weeks we will be looking at some of the vital signs we should attempt to strengthen to take us into the future as a healthy church. None of them are absent in our church, and we do well in many of them. Yet we should never cease to grow in all these areas of church life if we are to be the people of God in the full sense of what God intends.

4. So, what are these vital signs? Here is a way I have always found useful to order the vital signs of a healthy congregation: A church should have three faces: An upward face, an inward face, and an outward face. The upward face is, logically, worship. A church rich in worship not only shows a

vital sign of life, it assures its own health for the future. The inward face is all that the people in the church do to support one another and to help one another grow in their faith. The outward face is all the church does to serve their community and to share the good news of the gospel.

All these signs were visible in spades in the first church. We might do some of these things in different ways, due to the cultural differences between our time and place and theirs, but they demonstrate in a vital fashion how it was done in their time.

5. There was a clear **upward face** to the first church: We are told, *'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**.'* I'll come to the bit about breaking of bread in a minute. What is clear is that they were a praying congregation. They were much more than a human institution or a social club. They were a community, focused on God and they expressed that by gathering regularly for prayer.

Then, added to this, we hear, *'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**...'* They were not content to pray in the privacy of their own homes but sought each other out for communal worship. The ideal place for them to do that, in lieu of church buildings, and rental halls, were the temple courts, which provided open spaces for public meeting. Also, this was a place connected to God – a holy place.

The reference to breaking bread in homes is an interesting one. There is a difference of opinion whether this was a form of communion service that was done whenever they gathered in homes for meals or if it merely refers to them having communal meals. It seems to me that the weight of evidence is on the side of those who see this as a reference to these first Christians using many informal opportunities to break bread and drink the cup as a reminder of Christ's love for them. Also, we are told that these gatherings were marked by them 'praising God.' This was a church filled with joy whose source was their focus on God.

6. There was also a clear **inward face**. Luke tells us, *'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.'* So, there was good teaching, and believers supported one another in their faith by gathering together regularly.

But their support for one another was also very practical: *'All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.'*

Was this a kind of communism that we would need to emulate to be good Christians? No, we need to be careful about drawing simplistic parallels between such vastly different economic situations. In the time of the first church, the poverty levels were dire. People died from hunger daily. Added to this, there were certain classes of people who had no way of making an honest living and putting food on the table. Widows are a striking instance of this since they needed male patrons to enable them to participate in commerce or receive justice in court. When many of the rich people who became Christians sold property and possessions, they were addressing a situation in a very unequal society in the only way possible. They were not obligated to do this. It was not a new economic system introduced, but a way of caring for those in need. The difference

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between this and communism can be expressed in this way: Communism says, 'What you have is mine, too.' Christians say, 'What I have is yours as well' and willingly share from their bounty. There are many ways of doing this, and I see much of it in the generosity in our church.

7. There was also an **outward face**. Luke tells us that they enjoyed the favour of the people. Their way of life was attractive. What they believed was shared with others, and Luke adds, '*And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*' It seems to me that their witness to the gospel was so strongly supported by their healthy communal life that it was extremely effective. We hear that new people were added to their numbers daily.
8. A church with an upward face, an inward face, and an outward face – this is what Luke urges us to be. The good news is that even in the worst of times, the Holy Spirit works to instil these things in the most wayward of congregations. In our community of faith, we can point to examples of all these things.

In the coming weeks, we will do a kind of medical check-up for our congregation. We will look at a number of the most important vital signs to know what we need to attend to with diligence if we are to face the challenges of the future as a church in good health.

May the Lord bless us to see anew what an amazing thing it is to be part of the church, and specifically, how blessed we are to be part of this church.

Amen.

Rev. Dr. Breda Ludik
16 April 2023

The church: Not like any other organisation

Ephesians 4:1-16

'...speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.'

1. Let's see if we know how the church works. The pope is the head of the Roman Catholic church, right? The Archbishop of Canterbury is the head of the Church of England, right? The Moderator of the General Assembly is the head of the Church of Scotland, right? And the minister is the head of the congregation of SALU, right?

I'm afraid the answers are wrong, wrong, wrong, and wrong. The head of the church in every denomination and in every setting is Jesus Christ. He is not the honorary chairman of the board or the absentee king. He is the present and active head of the church. He is here, among us and involved in everything we do as church.

Our reading from Ephesians 4 gives us the classic description of the way the church works. From the first verse to the last, Christ is portrayed as the one who determines the shape of the church. Throughout we find the metaphor of the church as a body with Christ as the head.

This is totally unique. The church is different from any other organisation in this way. Certainly, we use terminology from other organisations, like calling God the king, but any of these metaphors fall far short of the mark. No human king is in direct, personal touch with all his subjects. No human king can truly say to every one of his subjects, 'You are my favourite.' No human king is directly involved in everything that goes on in his kingdom. On many other levels, the metaphor reveals itself as very limited. But it helps us to express something of who God is for us. So too when we call Jesus the head of the church. He is the head of all Christian denominations and of every Christian church. But he fills that role in a very unique way. We will look at the way our reading for today speaks of some of the ways in which he does this, but first we should come to grips with the fact that he heads his church by being present continuously. Nothing we do in the church is ever, ever done in his absence. Nothing in a healthy church is ever done without his full participation.

If a church tries to function without Christ as its head, it will not be a healthy church, much as a body cannot function without a head. In fact, it would be a dying church.

2. And so, I would post the first and most important vital sign of a healthy church to be this: Seriousness about the presence of Jesus Christ as head of the church.

Of course, this is what all of us would profess to believe. Unfortunately, there is often a gap between what we believe and what we practice. And this is true for all of us. It is one of the difficulties of living in the modern world as a Christian to take the active presence of Christ seriously.

Let me repeat something I told you a while ago, which illustrates this vividly. A friend of mine heads a church consultancy firm. When a congregation calls on their services, he sends them a questionnaire that they fill in ahead of time. In the questionnaire he has a number of strategically phrased questions that could be answered in two different ways. He then pays careful attention to the way the leadership fill in these questions. It would be questions like 'What happens when you gather for worship?' With few exceptions, they answer something like, 'We sing hymns, we pray, we read from the Bible, we listen to a sermon...' You know, the normal stuff.

When my friend addresses them in his first face-to-face meeting, he starts off by telling them that he has identified their main problem: 'You are functional atheists. You do everything in church, and it does not look as if you believe that God does anything.' You can imagine the shock this causes. He then explains what he means by functional atheism. He does not question their Christian faith, but the way it is practiced. Functional atheism is like someone who truly believes in God but lives as if God doesn't exist.

Of course, it is a bit of a trick question that my friend asks, a trap. And it is obviously a shock tactic to wake them up to a serious deficiency in their life as a church. I cannot help but wonder how well we would have coped with it (myself included). The point he makes at the start of his consultancy process is that the root cause of the problems they are experiencing can only be addressed if they are willing to allow God an active role in the church. This is the starting point for any congregation that seeks to be a healthy church. As we are facing a new era in SALU's history, it should be ours as well.

Last week we had a look at the three basic directions to which a healthy church turns its face: the upward face, the inward face, and the outward face. The first of these, and the one that is fundamental to the other two is the upward face. A healthy church is one that always turns towards the head of the church – the risen Lord Jesus – and gives him a say in all they do. A healthy church worships, prays, studies the Bible to get to learn more about God and Christian life. In a healthy church, the believers pray 'Thy will be done,' even when they come to the conclusion that doing God's will is not going to be easy. In this they follow the head of the church. In the garden of Gethsemane, facing the cross, he prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'

3. That brings me to the first way in which this has a practical impact on a healthy church. Honouring the resurrected Lord Jesus as the head of the church determines the direction we take as a church. Our reading started off with this loaded sentence: '*I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*' I like the use of the word 'call' here since it conjures up a picture of our Lord already at work and calling on us to join him. He does not send us and then stay behind. What we hear in this verse is that, as a church, we share a calling. We are all

beckoned to join our Lord Jesus in serving our world. Every single one of us has a calling to something specific – something the world needs. No matter how small and insignificant what we offer might seem to us, we are important members of Lord Jesus' team. As a congregation, we become a team with different specialities, assembled by our Lord to be his collaborators. And now, we are urged to live lives worthy of this amazing calling that we have received.

This is where Val's scene setter with the compass comes in. As Christians, our inner compass is drawn to the true north, which is the will of God. And yet, we often take a different course. We are drawn off course by other concerns, pretty much like the magnet affected the direction the needle pointed. Many things can act like that magnet when we choose our course. I am not going to list them. Each of us know what those distractions are in our particular case, and the list is endless. What we should constantly do is to ask ourselves if we are on the course the Lord Jesus is drawing us towards. A healthy church is one that is aware of its calling and constantly discerning what the will of the head of the church is. It is also very aware that there are many forces that might derail us, that might draw the needle of our inner magnet away from true North and cause us to live lives unworthy of the high calling we have received.

On a lighter note: There is the story of a golf pro working with a client who had a particularly hideous swing. He asks the client to hit a few balls so he can assess what to work on. The first ball curves out viciously to the right. 'What do you call that?' asks the client. 'That, sir,' says the golf pro, 'is a slice.' The client hits the next ball as hard as he can, wanting to impress the pro, and it fizzes off 45 degrees to the left. 'And what do you call that?' he asks. 'That, sir,' the pro says, 'is a hook.' As he puts a ball on the tee for a next shot, the client asks, 'And what would you call a ball that goes straight down the middle?' 'In your case, sir, I would call that a miracle.'

When we apply this to the church, it is no longer a joke. In a way of speaking, we are always looking for a miracle – for something more than human wisdom. We are constantly straining to find our true North – Christ, our head, showing us the way forward.

For us as a church this is very important. We are facing big decisions about the kind of church we will be in future, that is much more than decisions about our buildings. We must continue to pray for the guidance of the head of the church and we must continue to be willing to follow the lead he gives us.

4. There are a number of other implications of Christ being the head of the church that are addressed in this passage from Scripture, some of which will be covered in the weeks to come, but I will stick to only one more: **Christ, the head of the church, brings the church to maturity.** Modern Christians tend to think of spiritual growth, growth towards a mature faith, only in terms of their individual faith. We find a very different view here. The church is seen as something like a body where the whole body – all the limbs and organs – either grows and is healthy or becomes sick.

The goal towards which the church strives is that of a healthy body. And Christ provides all that is necessary for that. He provides leadership and he provides the gifts among members to take the church forward towards mature faith – faith that is not captured by every little whim and trend that emerges in our community. In our life as a community, we do not resemble a group

of squabbling children, each out to get their own desires met and to enforce their opinions on others. No, we become, more and more, a community where we look out for one another and build one another up; we become a community where every person can be her or his best self. We become a kind of human eco-system where all can flourish. The community life of the church becomes an expression of the character of Christ, our head. This is the way the goal of the church is set out for us: *'...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.'* This last bit is a mouthful: we attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. What it means is simply this: When people look at the way we act towards one another, when they see what our deepest values are, they get a proper idea of what our Lord Jesus Christ is like. That is where Christ is heading with us!

5. So, this is what we are part of. And it is, any way you look at it, quite amazing to be part of the church. The most compelling picture for me personally is the one we find in the first two verses of Hebrews 12:

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.'

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses to the glory of God. And we are guided by the head of the church, our Lord Jesus Christ, always ahead of us, rocksteady on the right course, and growing into greater health all the time. That is our journey as a church. That is the company in which we find ourselves.

Amen.

3. We're all in this together

Ephesians 4:1-16

*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it...
So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,
the pastors and teachers,
to equip his people for works of service,
so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith
and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

We come now to the third part in our series of looking at the vital signs of a healthy church. In the first part we saw that a church should have three faces: an upward face, an inward face, and an outward face. The upward face is worship towards God; the inward face is all we do to support and to help one another grow in our faith. The outward face is all the church does to serve their community and to share the good news of the gospel.

Last week we looked at the first vital sign: being serious about the presence of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church. We highlighted the dangers of functional atheism, where someone says they believe in God, but behaves as if God doesn't exist.

Today's focus is on the second vital sign – the inward face: **we are all in this together to mature in our faith**. But inevitably, its outworking also impacts on the upward and outward faces of the church.

Peter Pan can be read as a celebration of eternal childhood; however, it can equally be read as a cautionary tale about the risks of committing to such a state. Ultimately, Peter Pan is a very sad story. Wendy, her brothers, and the Lost Boys who return with them do grow up, but Peter never does.

Human beings are programmed to grow up. We're not supposed to remain children forever. And that is just as true spiritually as it is physically. We are to become more Christ like – or as our reading put it: we are to *grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ*.

It's a work in progress. Pilgrims are meant to progress! We have a responsibility to grow up.

I think we can all relate to the badge that sometimes comes with a birthday card: *I may be getting older, but I refuse to grow up.* For people who really live like this, their approach to life has been called the **Peter Pan Syndrome**. These are people who don't want the responsibilities that come with growing up.

Christians can be functional Peter Pans, by saying, 'I want to be more like Jesus, but I don't want the responsibility that comes with it.'

Seeing believers grow and mature in Christ was one of the goals of Paul's ministry, as we see, for example, in Colossians 1:28-29:

We proclaim him (Christ) by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ. Toward this goal I also labour, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me.

We have looked previously at spiritual growth at an individual level:

- in our basic Christian life course on Sunday mornings when we were all encouraged to adopt spiritual disciplines
- and again, this morning in the scene setter.

However, in the letter to the Ephesians, spiritual maturity is not just an individual goal; it is the goal for the entire body of Christ. We have a responsibility to grow up.

Our focus today is going to be on this part of our reading:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature**, attaining to the **whole measure of the fullness of Christ**.

Maturing involves both works of service and knowledge of Jesus.

The strapline in the scene setter was 'You are what you eat!' Eating behaviour is strongly influenced by social context. We eat differently when we are with other people compared with when we eat alone. Our dietary choices also tend to converge with those of our close social connections. You are what your peers eat! Weight gain has been shown to be contagious! Our networks are hugely important and influential. And the same is true for the church – including for us here at SALU.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it like this: 'The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.'

However, it's more than that. The presence and interaction of believers gives maturity to a community of body of believers, making the community of believers look more like Christ in thought and action. How is that made possible?

This brings us to what has been termed the fivefold ministry described here in Ephesians. These five ministries are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers – and they are given for the purpose of maturing the church.

There is quite a bit of discussion regarding those five ministries and whether they can all be applicable for today's church. Are today's apostles and prophets different from the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the early church? The answer is yes, but generalities can be drawn which can be extrapolated to our situation.

Another area of debate concerns the question: To what extent do any of us have these ministries? Are they for some and therefore not for everyone? I think we all have components of these five ministries to a varying degree. Verse 7 reads, 'But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it'.

Or, as another translation puts it, 'But each one of us has received a gift of grace'.

These gifts are given to us by Christ. *Grace* here is referring to one of the gifts of ministry, a gift given to each one of us. Our responsibility is to work out which ones we have been given. We cannot be Peter Pans and shy away from doing this.

As I describe characteristics of the ministries, I hope that they will resonate with you, that you will think, 'Yes, that describes me' or 'That does not so much describe me'. Or perhaps, 'Yes, that describes so and so, but that one not so much'.

Also, be aware that the main characteristics that you feel describe you today may change; you may feel a closer association with another description in the future. There is a fluidity about them.

These ministries together are for the growth and maturing of SALU. SALU needs you!

Maybe this is the uncomfortable bit, the bit that makes most – if not all – of us squirm, because there is also a place for discussing them with each other and exploring together which ministry or ministries we have. And it's not a one-off chat; it's a continuing conversation as our ministry may change over the years.

If we don't recognise and put our ministries into practice, there is a real risk that our growth here at SALU will be stunted.

The greatest disaster that ever came to the Church was when ministry was moved from the people to the professionals, and from the pew to the pulpit – when the hands-on, everyday ministry of the church was taken out of the hands of the members and given to the career ministers! In other words, people came to see the ministers as the apostles, the pastors, the evangelists, the pastors, the teachers, and no longer as the role of church members!

This was never God's plan for the Church, as our passage shows us. All who are part of the Body of Christ should be involved in the fivefold ministry. The minister cannot do it alone and should not be expected to do it alone; for that is a sign of an unhealthy church.

I now want to look at these five ministries in turn.

Apostle

The New Testament uses the word **apostle** in at least three senses. Apostle simply means *someone who is sent out*. Very specifically, it refers to Jesus who was sent by God to be the saviour of the world, to be the head of the church.

In another sense, apostle describes someone who was *uniquely commissioned by Christ to bear witness to him*. Originally it was the twelve disciples; then Judas was replaced by Matthias after Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, and later it was extended to include Paul as an apostle.

In its broadest sense, apostle means someone who is *sent out on a specific mission as a representative of the church, Christ’s body, here on earth*.

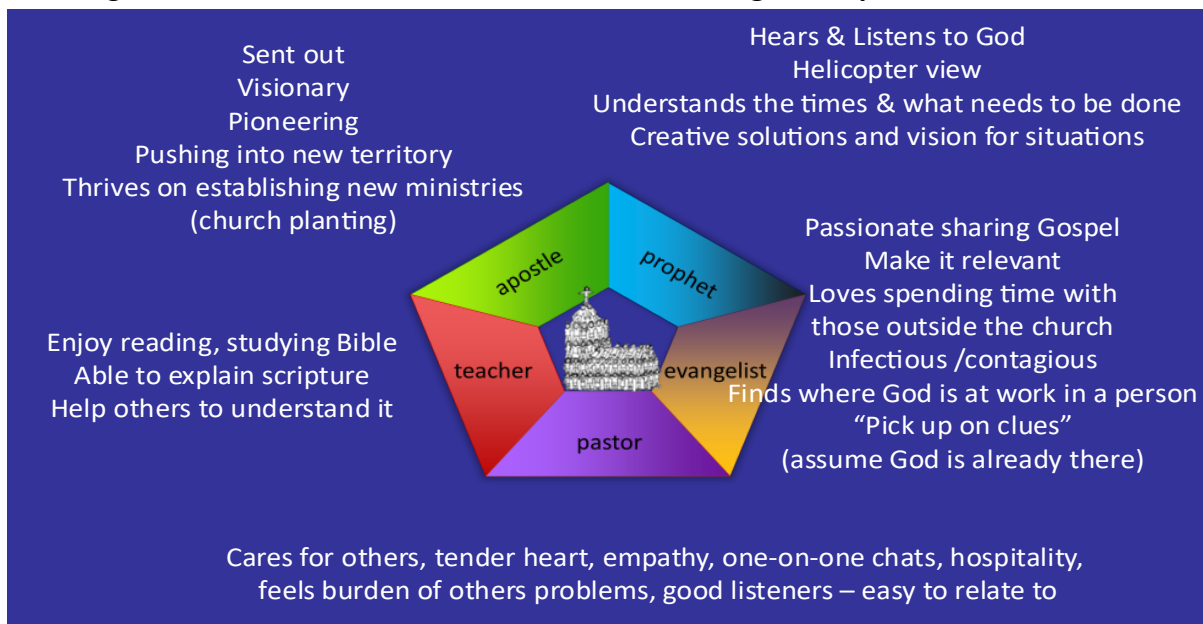
Prophet

A prophet is someone who receives messages from God, mainly concerning events that will take place in the future and conveys them to a certain group of people or singular person whom God intends to hear the delivered message.

The question is: Do prophets still exist today? Was John the Baptist the last of the prophets? It’s a contentious issue and opinion is divided.

Interestingly, Jesus warns us against false prophets, which suggests they still exist (Matthew 7:15).

I think the following description of a prophet is a safe description of a prophet for our times. This diagram also describes the characteristics of an **evangelist, a pastor and a teacher**:



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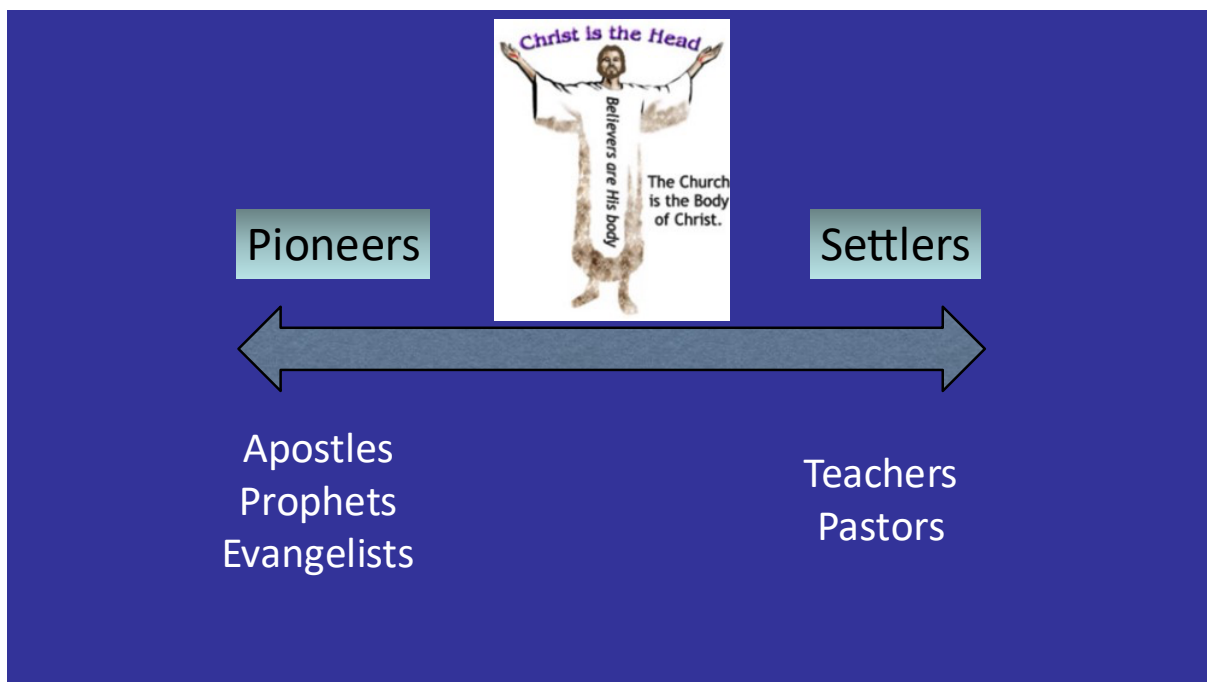
As we continue our journey in discerning our future as a community of believers here at SALU, we need to ask ourselves the question: Are we pioneers or settlers? This is where we start to move into the outward-facing face – and we will come back to this later in the series.

But to start to lay the foundation, we can think of the western movies we grew up with. The United States was expanded by the great effort of pioneers and settlers. It was the pioneers who set out to map the land beyond its initial boundaries. Pioneers ate strange foods, learned new languages. Pioneers established towns and cities for the settlers who would follow. But the settlers were equally important. They built on what pioneers had started. They faced different hardships, but both pioneers and settlers were necessary.

Sadly, tensions can arise and cause division and disunity in the body: tensions between breaking new ground versus putting down roots and consolidating what has been begun.

Both a mutual respect and an understanding of the roles God has given us are required.

Here is a diagram that I hope is helpful in showing how the fivefold ministry fits in. It's a picture we should be getting familiar with: Christ is the head; we are the body.



Pioneers are more likely to be the apostles, prophets, and evangelists, whereas the teachers and the pastors are more likely to be settlers.

As we discern God's direction for us as a church, we can see that God has given each one of us a responsibility to contribute to our future and the health of SALU. Yesterday at Talkabout, we were using our prophetic gifts – and we will hear more about that when we hear the feedback soon.

In 2015, we looked at this passage as part of the Church of Scotland Talents initiative. Remember the body of Christ cake (made of madeira cake and gingerbread men)? The

macaroni characters, the team building exercise where everybody was needed to make the models out of spaghetti and marshmallows?

From our thinking this morning: What does our church look like?

Our environment is so important to our development and our maturing. Being a Peter Pan character or a functional atheist is a hindrance to the wellbeing of SALU.

We are all in this together – and we must be team players. *Your* contribution matters to the health of the church. Ministry is not a one-person show; that is why Jesus gifted us with this fivefold ministry.

These five ministries are given for our maturing, which means that we are all learning from each other, growing together, looking both outward and inward, and becoming more Christlike together.

It's a collective responsibility, and Jesus has given each of us a role in maturing his people, whether you are a pioneer or a settler, an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor or a teacher. **We are all in this together.**

Amen

Prayer

Too often we fall into the trap of being functional atheists or functional Peter Pans.

*Lord God, we want a healthy church,
a church where Jesus is our head and focus,
and we are a willing body.*

*Allow your Spirit to mature us –
both as individuals and as a body of your people,
as you open our minds and hearts to how we
work together to become more Christlike.*

*Show us and use the ministries you have equipped us with,
discerning your direction for the future,
serving you,
and increasing our knowledge of you,
in unity and in love.*

Amen

*Grant Cumming
30 April 2023*

4. One + one = three

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12 and 24b-26

1. I remember an exercise we once did on a course I attended, an exercise that thoroughly convinced me of something I had suspected for some time. The exercise was set up to demonstrate synergy. Synergy, as you well know, is what happens when a group of people work together so well that they produce something that is better than anything they could have done on their own, and even better than the sum of their efforts. It is sometimes illustrated by saying, '1 + 1 = 3'.

After first writing down our ideas on a large and complex task, we were divided into a number of small groups to merge our insights into one. Unknown to us, the instructions for each group were different, and created three kinds of groups, with different group dynamics. The first were competitive groups. Participants ended up trying to convince the others about the merits of their own contributions. The second were democratic groups that were based on give-and-take, making compromises. The third were groups structured to develop synergy.

I was in one of the synergy groups, and it was wonderful! We freely shared our ideas and were open to others' ideas. Afterwards, we could hardly remember which part of the end product was whose idea. And when the end products were compared, the groups structured for synergy performed much better than any of the other groups. The scores of the competitive groups were all the same as those of the most forceful member of the group – not always the person with the best project. The scores of the democratic groups were pretty much the average of the individual scores. But the synergy groups not only outscored the other groups; they also discovered that their group tasks scored higher than any of the group members' individual tasks did! Indeed: 1 + 1 = 3.

Why do I tell this story? Because it is the way the church works when it is a healthy church. The church, Paul teaches us, is like a body. It has a great variety of organs and body parts, but they do not compete or compromise. All of us, to a greater or lesser extent, have what we call coordination. Great athletes are distinguished by fantastic coordination, but even the clumsiest individual illustrates the how much more can be done when all these body parts work together. The church consists of people with a great variety of gifts that the Holy Spirit pours out on them and when they synchronise, we get the most amazing synergy. We get the 1 + 1 = 3 phenomenon.

2. Unfortunately, we live in a society where individualism is rampant and where it is encouraged. It is usually portrayed as a brave, positive stance. It is hard to argue against the negative aspects of the kind of coercive society that suppresses our individuality. But we should see that the biblical view of the church is something very different from either of these extremes. In the church we glory in the individual differences between Christians. In fact, we see recognition of every Christian's unique contribution as the key to health.

1 Corinthians 12 is only one of a number of passages in the Bible that extolls the great variety of gifts that are given in the church. And here, as elsewhere, we are encouraged to be what God has created us to be and to use the gifts the Spirit has endowed us with to the benefit of the church. Paul tells us that no Christian is unimportant in the church, much as no part of a body is unimportant for the health of the body. He tells us that every member of the body of Christ, the church, has a gift that was given for the benefit of all.

This is not stifling collectivism, where people are manipulated or forced into one desirable mould. Yet, it is also not individualism, where we each do our own thing and where my individual welfare is more important than that of the group. To the contrary, we are told that we flourish as a group and not as loose-standing individuals. We are given a variety of gifts, but none of these, on its own, is sufficient for our wellbeing. Only when we serve one another with our gifts can we flourish as a church and as individuals within the church.

This gives us our vital sign number 3 for a healthy congregation: *All gifts the Spirit grants are practiced*. Only when this is true of a congregation can we call it a healthy church. If this is not true of a church, it will either be a democratic church, where members are very accommodating and constantly making compromises to accommodate each other, or a competitive church, filled with power struggles. We are given a radically different vision of the church. We are the body of Christ and he is the head of the church. And so, we share a love and loyalty that melts away power struggles and competition and where the value of every gift that the Spirit pours out into the church is appreciated and adds to the glowing health of the community of faith.

3. A brief last word needs to be said about the types of gifts that we find in the church. Last Sunday, Grant spoke about the five-fold ministry that we find in Ephesians 5: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. They are presented as essential gifts that are given to equip the whole of the church to grow into maturity and to serve God. Grant stated that each of us has at least a little something of each of these, even if we might find it very hard to place ourselves in any of the categories. In our passage for today, a large number of gifts are mentioned, together with some of the gifts in the five-fold ministry. It is clear that there are many more gifts that the Spirit gives if a church needs them. And these gifts tend to slot in to contribute to each of these five ministries. Just think of the contribution of gifts of welcoming and music and IT skills and hospitality to a morning service, where all of the five ministries function. And think of the way a person who is infectious in what she or he does supports and plays a role in helping people cross the line into the world of faith. Is that not participation in evangelism? I could carry on like this for some time, but the point I want to make is simple: If we believe the gifts we see operating in our congregation are planted by the Holy Spirit according to our need, to build us up to be a healthy church, then there are no insignificant gifts, no unimportant members of the body of Christ.
4. That tells me two things about our congregation: We can trust God to provide all we need for growth in maturity and in numbers. When a church embarks on a road to follow its head and to serve him in the way he nudges them to do, they will discover that they have all they ever need. It might seem as if there are vital gifts we lack, but let us trust the Spirit for this.

The second thing I learn from this is that every member of our congregation is vital to our health. It is pretty much like the church that was built with macaroni sticks and marshmallows at a Talkabout a few years ago. Imagine taking out some of the macaroni sticks or marshmallows. It would soon start to sag and lose its shape.

The shape of the church relies on every little piece of the whole being there, exactly where God has placed us. Not one of us is unimportant for the future of the church. And so, play your role – not matter how insignificant you might think it is. And believe that there is no such a thing as an insignificant member of our congregation!

May the Lord take us deeper into this wonderful mystery where we discover ourselves as this kind of community more and more each day. Amen.

Rev. Dr Breda Ludik
7 May 2023

5. God's alternative society

Readings: John 13:34, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 5:21, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Galatians 6:2, Colossians 3:16 and Colossians 3:13

1. God is a god of relationships. If we are in any way to reflect who God is, a healthy church should reflect the character of God in the way its members act towards one another, in the kind of community life it displays. Considerable attention is given to this in the Bible. When Jesus goes into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray on the night before his crucifixion, he prays for the unity of believers and for love between them. In John 17:22-23 he says,

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

When Paul writes his letters, the dominant metaphor he uses for the church is that of a family. It is so pervasive that we hardly even notice it anymore. We address God as 'Father'. We are 'brothers and sisters' of one another. We are called 'members of the household of God'. We are to extend 'brotherly love' towards one another. The image this presents is of a close-knit, loving and supporting family, with a loving father.

We tend to take this for granted, without realizing how revolutionary it was for a religious group in those days. The two dominant patterns in religion were very different. In the Greek and Roman world, religion was based in temples with priests. Sacrifices were offered and oracles were consulted, but people mostly came only on certain feast days, and it was very much centred on the buildings. In Judaism, people gathered in synagogues to be taught by a rabbi. From the start, the church was different. It had an upward face, focused on God. It also had an inward face, which had the teaching aspect in common with its roots in Jewish worship, but a large part of the inward face of the healthy churches that we found in those foundational years was their vibrant community life. They took care of one another in impressive ways.

This gets us to the one-another texts. Most of the seven texts we read this morning are repeated elsewhere. There are 59 one-another texts spread throughout the New Testament as descriptions of the ways in which these rich family relationships among the children of God are practiced. All of them have the same Greek word as their basis: *alleloin* – 'one another'. It is not morality we practice as individuals, but something we do as a community, pretty much like a choir that is only heard rightly when all members sing their part in unison.

Let's have a look at these seven texts to get a feel for the kind of community our Lord creates.

2. John 13:34 – ***'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.'***

This seems to be the basic one-another text. It occurs 17 times. All the others can be construed as ways of showing love, as applications of this one. Notice who sets the norm for the quality of the love in a healthy congregation. The norm is Jesus' love for us. There can be no higher bar set for love than this.

When a congregation is healthy, all its members feel loved. This makes a huge difference to all concerned. When we feel loved and appreciated, our best qualities are unlocked. We feel free to simply be who God made us to be; to be the best version of ourselves. If we feel loved and appreciated in the family of God, it also helps us to embrace more of God's love. We often struggle to fully comprehend God's love for us simply because we are made to feel unlovable in our social circles. When we feel that acceptance is conditional in our social world, we struggle to fully accept that God's love for us is unconditional. That is why the greatest boost we can give to others' faith is simply to love them unconditionally.

3. How do we do this? The other one-another texts give us a wide range of very practical ways of doing this. Take Galatians 5:13 – ***'You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.'***

Does this remind you of anything Jesus did? Of course! It reminds us of Jesus taking the towel and washing the disciples' feet, and then calling upon them to humbly serve one another. Service takes on many forms – as many as there are needs among us. Service mostly means sacrificing some time or some of my means, but in a community where we serve one another, it does not feel like a sacrifice; it feels like a privilege! This is pretty much what is expressed in the old song, *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother*. We could turn that into a hymn that goes, 'It's no sacrifice, she's my sister'.

4. In Ephesians 5:21 we get a one-another text that prescribes the basic attitude that leads to a willingness to serve one another: ***'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.'***

Now, here is a passage that has often been used selectively! It is used at the start of the famous bit about husbands and wives: *'Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church...'*

A lot of mischief can be made of this passage if it is read apart from Ephesians 5:21, that immediately precedes it, where *all* Christians are called to submit to one another. Mischievous use of this passage to cement the male partner of a marriage in a domineering position also separates it from what follows: *'Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.'* So far, so good, but it continues: *'Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...'* Ah! So, husbands are also supposed to submit to their wives! You see what this is about. It is about submitting to one another. It is about a way of being in a Christian marriage in which we willingly give up what might be viewed as individual rights, and we do this freely and in equal measure. This was a revolutionary approach to married life at the time. Society was patriarchal to the extreme and women had few rights to stand on. The impact of this in the first centuries of the church was

huge. At one stage in the third century, non-Christian men complained that they found it hard to find women to marry who were not Christians.

The call to submit to one another is extended even further in Ephesians 5 – to parents and children and even to slaves and their owners! Without saying more about the way slavery in those days was very different from what we know as slavery, we should note that slaves were seen as part of the household at the time of the first church. And so, husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and owners are all called upon to submit to one another. Talk about a radical view of family life!

5. The one-another texts also cover other dimensions of our existence. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11 we read, ***'Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.'***

As we saw last week, we are not a competitive church where power struggles are part of the dynamics. We are a community in which, as Christ said on many occasions, the first will be last and the last first, where the most important person is the one serving all. And, of course, Christ exemplified this. In a healthy church, we do the opposite of what is rampant in so many organizations where people are trying to get to the head of the pile by pushing others down. No, we are a church where the full potential of all is unlocked and synergy occurs, as we saw last week; a church where 1 + 1 often equals 3!

This is proposed in another way in Galatians 6:2, ***'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.'***

In a healthy church we do the opposite of weeding out the weak. We are there for one another in times of trouble, in times of suffering. It might seem as if we have enough burdens of our own. I might ask myself, 'How can I add to the weight by carrying another's burden as well?' This is where the magic of a synergy church kicks in again. Once a community starts caring for one another, they find that, somehow, there is enough energy to go around. A community of people who are hardly strong enough to carry their own burdens discover that when they reach out to each other, there is enough strength to keep everyone going. Don't ask me how this works; I only know it does, for I have seen it too many times to doubt it.

But a healthy church is also not merely a democratic church, as we saw last week. In the Ephesians 4 passage we focused on during the first two weeks of this series, we are urged towards speaking the truth in love. Love that disconnects from the truth is tepid niceness and not real love. A democratic church where people accommodate one another by giving up on truth is not a healthy church. But the opposite is also not healthy. Truth without love is not truth, but bullying.

And so, we get the passage in Colossians 3:16, ***'Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom...'***

This focus on truth does not make us rigid or intolerant. It is a labour of love. Therefore, we get the charge of Colossians 3:13, ***'Bear with each other and forgive one another...'***

6. We could go on like this for a very long time. All in all, there are 59 one-another texts. They are the nuts and bolts of being a healthy church. They fly in formation as a beautiful tapestry that

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spells out in very concrete terms how we can be the kind of community that demonstrates the love of God.

But should this only be something we do to our brothers and sisters in the church? Of course not. Next Sunday we will focus on the outward face of a healthy church. But we should acknowledge that it would be very difficult for a church that does not have this one-another culture to love and serve others who might not respond with love and service towards us. The church becomes a kind of training ground for our engagement with those outside the community of faith.

But there is more to it than that. A healthy church is God's alternative community. It not only articulates the truth of the kingdom; it embodies it. It demonstrates it, with the doors open to anyone who would like to join.

Would you like to be part of this kind of community? Who wouldn't!

Amen.

Rev Dr Breda Ludik
14 May 2023

6. Let me introduce you

Readings: Matthew 28:16-20 and 1 Peter 3:15

1. Let me start with a confession. I am a bit intimidated by this morning's theme. But there is no getting around it: If the subject of evangelism is not addressed, the picture of a healthy church is incomplete. A healthy church has an upward face, turned towards God. This is easy to talk about. We all feel comfortable hearing it needs to receive attention. The first vital sign we posted was 'Seriousness about the presence of Jesus Christ as the head of the church'. Of course, this is not all our upward face focuses on, but it makes the living presence of God real and practical when we acknowledge our Lord as the driving force of our church.

A healthy church has an inward face. The inner life of the church is important. Nobody ever objects to this being stressed. The second vital sign we posted was 'Becoming mature'. The third vital sign was 'All gifts of the Spirit are practiced.' The fourth vital sign we posted was 'Healthy, caring relationships'. None of these are difficult to talk about. Also, I see so many of these things practiced in SALU that it is obviously something of great importance to all.

But it is necessary to add that a healthy church has an outward face. A healthy church is concerned with much more than itself. The fifth vital sign of a healthy church is this: Service and evangelism. A healthy church cares about the people in its community. It does so because we are convinced that God cares deeply about all people. And so, we reach out to our neighbours and to people in crises in other countries. Today is Christian Aid Sunday. During the past week, many of you have been doing the rounds, collecting for Christian Aid and contributing with gifts. When we do this as freely and wholeheartedly as it is done here, it is a sign of health. There are many other ways in which we become involved in the community and in the wider world – some of it as a church, and some of it as individuals. This can be by our participation in the Guild, helping with teas at Black Hills, commitment to community activities, friendships, the Thrift Shop, community choirs – too many activities to mention. All of this is part of being a healthy church and I see so much of it practiced here in SALU.

2. But social involvement is only one half of what it means to care for our world. We know that abundant life comes from God. We know that God, who loves this world, desires to have all human beings gathered around him as his children. That brings us to evangelism. Our concern for people in our community and in the world involves their relationship with God; in older language, it involves their souls. In the middle of our reading this morning we find that well-known call to action that we call the Great Commission: '*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...*' The whole of the gospel of Matthew flows into this last scene of Jesus' life, and at the centre of this scene, we find the Great Commission. Not many of us do not find this intimidating. Some of us are introverts for whom the idea of approaching another person and trying to convince him or her to accept Christian faith is difficult to conceive. Most of us feel inadequate to speak about our faith. Add to that that we do not want to be perceived as 'holier than thou' or arrogant. We live in a time where tolerance is expected of all and questioning

another's beliefs is seen as a kind of intolerance. Stating our religious views as the norm, as true while others are false, we fear, would make us seem arrogant.

Whatever the reason, we live in a time in which evangelism is not one of the church's strong suits. While we are ready to admit that, we are not happy about the state of affairs. It is not difficult to evoke feelings of guilt about the subject of evangelism, but I don't intend going in that direction.

3. A good look at our reading for today brings some relief and practical help. The first thing that we should notice is a remark Matthew slips in right at the start of the passage. Jesus meets his disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee and then Matthew writes: *'When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.'* I take courage from this. Jesus does not separate the doubters and the ones with no doubt. His call to be his witnesses goes out to all of them, including those with weak faith. We tend to think of an evangelist as a kind of super-Christian. Jesus, apparently, does not! Ordinary believers, doubts and all, are included in the Great Commission. Jesus does not single out the well-spoken, the confident, the socially acclaimed as his witnesses. He commissions us all and seems to have confidence in all of us. What a thought!

There was a man in a previous congregation in which I served. He was one of the most natural evangelists I have ever seen. He took a group of teenagers as a Sunday School class every year, and invariably, a number of them would make a commitment to God during that year. And yet, he is far removed from our standard image of an evangelist. He is an introvert, soft spoken, very old fashioned in the way he dresses and wears his hair. But his love for God and for these unruly boys was so authentic, that those of them who were not convinced Christians soon wanted to share what he had. He had a special gift, to be sure, but he reveals the lie of our standard idea of an evangelist.

4. A second thing to notice in the passage is that the Great Commission is sandwiched between two massive statements. The first is this: *'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'* Evangelists do not operate on the strength of their personal authority. We are the ambassadors of the Lord of all, the one with all authority in heaven and on earth. There is no reason on earth for them to be reticent in talking about their Lord.

The other statement, with which Jesus ends his little discourse, is this: *'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'* This is very meaningful to me. The thought of bearing witness with my Lord in the room with me is even more encouraging. He will be the one to create the openings for a conversation about his kingdom. He will give me the confidence and the words to express more than I will be able to do on my own.

5. Both of these statements are helpful in encouraging me to bear witness, but the term that our Lord uses to express his commission helps me much more. He does not say something like 'Make Christians of all the nations...' or 'Make good people of all the nations...' He says, 'Make disciples.' This is very different. It adds the personal element. A disciple is different from a student or a trainee, who learn from their teacher or coach, who simply tries to get them to assimilate certain knowledge or skills. A disciple is, quite literally, a follower. Jesus invited his disciples to follow him and to become part of his inner circle. He spent time with them. They had long conversations.

They saw the way he interacted with people. They built close relationships with him. That is what it means to be a disciple.

This means that evangelism is not saying, 'Let me tell you where you are wrong!' It is also not 'Let me tell you how to get your life in shape!' It is not confrontational. It is saying something in the line of, 'Let me introduce you to someone absolutely wonderful. You have an invitation to become one of the inner circle.' And we know that deep in their hearts there is a yearning in human beings to meet our Lord personally.

For the person on the receiving end, it is something like an experience I had last week. I met someone from the place where my favourite Scottish author lives for most of the year. It's a place that is on my short list of places to visit. When he heard that I liked the author's novels, he told me that he knows him personally, and that he could introduce me to him if I came there in summer. Orkney has now moved up much higher on my list of places to visit!

Looking at witnessing in this way makes it a very different proposition from the daunting prospect of having to set others right in terms of their outlook on life or life choices. Of course, getting to know God personally will inevitably end up causing a shift in all of these things, but it will be something done willingly and gladly.

6. This is the tack taken in 1 Peter 3:15: *'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.'* Notice that Peter's statement assumes that the way we practice our faith will draw out enquiries. This can only occur if you are part of a healthy church that produces this kind of people. And, to return to what was said at the start, a healthy church is only healthy when it displays all three aspects of a healthy church:
 - an upward face that displays our focus on God and our love for him,
 - an inward face, where we are supported and cared for, and where we receive nourishment from the Word of God to become mature Christians,
 - and an outward face: a willingness to engage in service and witness to the world that God loves so much.

If these things are in place, a church produces people who are infectious. CS Lewis spoke of 'the good infection' that the gospel produces. Our love for God becomes infectious, attractive in a way that piques the interest of others. Our delight in the community of faith and our enjoyment of life becomes infectious. Others see it and wish they could have the same. This is when our witness and our service draw people's attention to our Lord, and this is when they can also become infected with the good infection.

One last thing about Peter's text. Notice that Peter urges us to do this *'with gentleness and respect'*. There is no arrogance involved. My contention is that this was the way the Lord Jesus himself spoke his gospel to people. When you get to know him well, you intuitively know that no other way of speaking would fit.

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7. Let me close with a reference to the fivefold ministry of the church that Grant lifted from Ephesians 4 in the third of this series. One of the five ministries in the group of essential ministries for the church is that of the evangelist. Grant said that we all have something of each of these ministries in us. We might not see ourselves as evangelists at all. Not everybody has this as a gift. But we are all witnesses. We have a story to tell, good news to share. We have all contracted the good infection and we have all tasted and seen the goodness of God. And that, brothers and sisters, turns us into witnesses. And the cloud of witnesses supports the work of evangelists and feeds into the evangelistic work done by the church.

I am often confronted with the need for growth in numbers in the Church of Scotland and other churches. This is my prayer: That our witness through our worship, our quality of community life and service will grow to such an extent that the questions about our hope will come thick and fast; that we will, each in our own way, find the words to account for our faith.

Amen.

Rev Dr Breda Ludik
21 May 2023