

Tasks of the church

Acts 2.42-47

As you may know, during Easter, we have ‘compulsory’ readings from the Acts of the Apostles, which give us a picture of what life was like for the first generation of Christians, as well as a reading from the Gospels. Today’s reading from Acts is very short – but in those six verses is a summary of what the tasks of the church were, and how they were fulfilled. And there is no reason to suppose that the tasks for us today are any different in essence, however different the context may be. There seem to be four of them. What I would invite you to do is to explore how those four tasks were played out in the 1st century, and reflect on how well or otherwise we are grappling with them now.

The first task is **Telling**. The lesson begins by saying ‘Many were baptised and were added to the community’ and ends with a similar statement – ‘And day by day the Lord was adding to their number those who were being saved.’ Whether we find it comfortable or not, we have to face the fact that we are in a post-Christian society, and that the majority – yes, the majority – of people do not know the Christian message. So it isn’t a question of people rejecting it, but rather of their not knowing it. For some people it is that they do know a very limited amount, gleaned from folk religion rather than anything more reliable. That can hinder rather than help. Alexander Pope wrote: ‘A little knowledge is a dangerous thing’

If you look for what the message was they proclaimed in the 1st century, the sermons in Acts can be summarised in six points – 1) the Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled. 2) This has happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. 3) Jesus has been exalted as Messiah and Lord. 4) This belief has been confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit 5) Jesus will return to bring everything to its completion and 6) Everyone in the meantime has the opportunity to respond by repentance and to receive forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit.

In some ways we have a harder task than they did, because we can’t assume the religious background that they could. But we see in the way Paul preached to the pagans in Athens that you can adapt that outline to new circumstances. That is what for example the ordination service says of the faith - that ‘the Church is called upon to proclaim it *afresh in every generation*’.

Now we do that as an institution, by what we do together. But in order for the church to act like that, it has to get people inside. For example the remarkable fact came to light about fifteen years ago that at that time roughly half the population go into a church or chapel for a wedding service each year. They say there are lies, damned lies, and statistics. But even if that statistic is wrong by 50%, it is still a remarkable number. That number is far far less now – Covid and other factors have seen to that, with far fewer Church weddings. But opportunities exist which we try to grasp *inside* our church buildings. But it is

clear that those first believers were telling the story *outside* any religious building. They were on the streets, and in people's homes. So the question has to be faced, however uncomfortable it may be for us – 'what am *I* doing to share the good news of the love of God in Jesus?' We may do it in answering questions, or making comments. Sometimes we will do it not in words, but in what we do. We are *all* called to be part of the church's task of **telling**. And if we do not see people being added to our number, then it means we are not doing it as well as we might. The fact locally, I think, is that we *do* see people added to our number, but they only just replace the number we lose because they have died or moved away. Inevitably, we could do better.

The second task is **Doing**. I am using that very broad word to express what the New Testament calls *διάκονιά* (*diakonia*) – or 'service'. If 'telling' is about 'outreach' then this is about 'inreach' – and you are in a parish named after a Deacon – Laurence – whose task was to care for the needy in the church community. If we listen to what they did in the 1st century, it is quite remarkable. Do you remember we read that 'they would sell all their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.' It is a good passage to use with people who claim to take the Bible literally – somehow that desire seems to evaporate if they are asked to take *those* verses literally. But that is what they did in 1st century Jerusalem, for a while at any rate. If we are not showing service – *διάκονιά* – in that way – how do we do it now? Again we could look at both the institutional level and the personal level. Most of the pastoral care in any church community is hidden. I don't suppose most of us know a fraction of what happens in our name, as it were. People are often very grateful for the support that they get at times of crisis from the church community. That such support is there is how it should be. But as with telling, we can always do more and better. Again, it is not only what is done officially, but in the ordinary course of life by people who want to share the love of God in whatever way is possible for them by **doing**.

The third task is **Being**. Twice in that short passage from Acts we read that the Christian community were 'together'. They were in what the New Testament writers called a *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*) – a 'fellowship'. They were bound together in the love of God which united them, and which therefore spilt out from them not only to the needy within their community, but to those outside it. So we hear of them healing and being concerned in a more general way. The task for us today is still to be like that – reaching out to the marginalised and rejected in our world, and having a sense of belonging which reaches beyond the local to the worldwide. That is why our concern for world mission, and our giving to it is so vital. We are not a religious club, but as Archbishop Temple is supposed to have said, we are 'the only organisation which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.' That is why it is encouraging to have people in our congregations who are committed to all sorts of service beyond the religious community – taking a lead in local organisations, and in national and international charities and concerns. We say that we are the 'Body of Christ', as Paul taught. We are the means by which his love is to be seen. And just as he associated with the outcasts and those who were despised, we have a responsibility to mirror that in what we do as a church community, and as individual believers.

The last task is **Celebrating**. That is what we do when we go to church. Whatever other emotions we may bring, when we meet together we ought to be in a mood for celebration – a word which really means ‘honouring’. That 1st century community we read about in that passage from Acts did so in at least two ways. It says they ‘spent much time together in the Temple’ but also that they ‘broke bread at home...praising God.’ That is also a reminder that whilst we can’t always *gather* in church, we don’t stop *being* the church. Those early believers had not yet left the Jewish fold. So they found that their new faith in Jesus the Messiah was entirely compatible with the usual worship of the Temple – with all its formality and ritual. Whatever kind of service you attend in a church, it will have those elements of formality and ritual, because it is bringing together people to act as a unit. I recall being at a meeting when a Pentecostal Christian was leading prayers. You might have expected those prayers to be spontaneous and not formal. In fact it was full of formalised prayer language, not from a book, but from a different tradition. It was just as ritualised, but in another way. We need some kind of framework, just as they did in the Temple in the first century. But they also worshipped at home.

Thank God for the ways in which St Laurence’s fulfils the calling to Tell, to Do, to Be and to Celebrate. And let us ask God to help us, as a community, and as individuals, to do each of those tasks better, both in normal times, and in any extraordinary ones, so that, as we heard in the reading from Acts, the Lord will ‘add to our number those who are being saved.’