

Church Day All Souls' Day
Theme: There is no plan B
I believe in "the Holy catholic church, the communion of saints"
Readings: 1 Corinthians 11:27 – 34, John 17:11, 13 – 23

Several days a week I go for a morning walk. Sometimes I go down Chelsea Ave. Every time I do I go past the house that Valda Shackleton owned. And my heart does the sad/happy/wistful thing those of you who have lost anyone you love will be familiar with.

Anywhere around this area is like that isn't it? Wensley Road and the Pitman's and Silke's houses, not to mention the Rest Homes where many of our loved ones spend some time. Everywhere, we are reminded of Christian people who were so involved in this church and others – people who loved the Lord and served him passionately.

On Friday evening a small group of us held an All Soul's service to remember some who have been very special to us. We lit a candle for them and pinned a flower, with their names on, to the tree at the back. You are welcome to write the names of your loved ones on a flower and pin it to the tree too, if you'd like to do that. today is All Saints' Day so it is appropriate that we celebrate the holy catholic church and the communion of saints.

The church is so much bigger than we sometimes think. We belong to an amazing family here at Church on the Hill. (It was a joy to see you all working towards a common purpose yesterday; to hear the chatter and laughter.) In the Western world the church does appear to be in decline but we are a tiny part of the church across the world. We are an even smaller part of the church that has existed throughout history; the church that will continue until Christ comes again.

Lots of people don't believe in the church by the way. Not just those outside the Christian faith either. Lots of Christians are totally disillusioned with the church and have walked away.

Perhaps for good reasons? We are far from perfect aren't we? We hurt each other. We fail to communicate effectively. We are selfish and judgemental and critical and well, human. But we expect more from each other. After all we are Christians!

Some years ago one of my children said something nasty to another child. I can't remember what it was she said, but she said it in church. The child's mother retorted "I expect this kind of thing to happen in the playground but not in church!"

But the church is much bigger than our failings. It is a mistake to get hung up on something that someone did back in 1947. That one episode, that one person, or that one group of people, does not define the church.

I'm hoping to go some way towards answering two questions today:
What is the church?
Why does it exist?

So what is the church?

The church was born from the background of the Jewish gathered assembly; the congregation of Israel. It was to the gathered assembly that the commandments of God were given back in the first Testament. Duet 9:10 So one definition of the church is “a body of people waiting for a message from God.”¹

The church was also born into a Greek background. In that context the ecclesia was a political body that met ten times each year to make democratic decisions. In Athens the trumpeter would call everyone to the meeting. Not all would come. So in another sense the church is a gathering of those who have responded to a call.

Obviously the church is people as opposed to a building.

What kind of people?

Holy people – called out ones, people who have responded to Jesus’ invitation to follow him; those who have had their sins forgiven and entered into eternal and abundant life in Christ. The church holds the cross of Christ as central because it is through the cross that we find new life. Jean used the term “regeneration” to describe what happens to the new Christian last week. The bottom line is that the church is made up of those who have responded to Jesus’ love by loving and following him in return.

The Ecclesia is the whole church and it is also various congregations. In each case, the church has always been very clear who the boss is. The head of the church is Jesus Christ. Eph 4:15

Looking at the passage St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, we can see that there was lots they didn’t get right either. The church was apparently made up of a series of cliques. They were more interested in filling their bellies than taking part in the Lord’s Supper - Holy Communion as we more frequently call it.

Church attendance is a different matter. Talking with someone recently, they asked me what was required to be a member of this church. In the olden days you used to have to believe specific things, maybe the

Church is often likened to a family. That is a good analogy. Jesus called the people he was with his “mother and brothers”. He went on to say that “Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!” Matthew 12:49 – 50

According to the creed the church is holy and catholic. Jesus originally called people who were to be different from others. They were to be salt of the earth and lights to the world. They could be this only because Jesus made them holy. They were never perfect but they were holy just as we are. Next week Tom will speak more about the forgiveness of sins which is the basis of our holiness.

¹ William Barclay, The plain man’s look at the Apostles’ creed, 258

The church is also catholic. Once I worked for a Christian organisation which required people to sign the creed before they could be signed on as volunteer or paid staff member. Often people would say they didn't believe in the Catholic Church. They didn't understand that catholic simply means universal. The church is catholic in the sense that it isn't limited by location or time. The church world-wide and it has existed throughout history and will continue to exist until Jesus comes again.

Jesus, preparing Peter for his death, said "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." He also said he would build his church on "this rock". Protestants believe the rock he was talking about was himself – the Messiah. There is no Plan B. The church will stand throughout human history. No doubt it will change hugely.

In the early days the church looked different to how it does now. People say "Let's get back to how the early church was" but there are lots of different models in the New Testament. Certainly there weren't church buildings and people mostly met in houses but they also met in synagogues and porticos of the temple at times. Some had "all things in common" ie they shared their possessions, and some didn't. Some were very generous financially eg Paul collecting money for the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. The fact is that the early church was a mess. All the letters in the NT are written to address problems including immorality far worse than the world was involved in at the time.

As time went on the church has been persecuted, almost died in some parts of the world, flourished again, split and split and split. It is said there are over 33,000 denominations in the world now.² Crazy! Yet somehow this fallen institution remains God's chosen instrument.

So why does the church exist?

The overarching purpose is to worship God and bring him glory. And we do that by:

1. Enabling people to meet Jesus
2. Discipling Christ followers
3. Providing a safe place of fellowship
4. Caring practically for each other and the world

We need our evangelists. Not many have come out with this gifting when we've done the spiritual gifts courses but I think that is because the questions are slanted in an American way. But all of us are to take the Good News of Jesus to all around us.

Discipling others is an area where the church has fallen short over the last few decades. It is something we will be working much more consciously on. There are lots of ways to disciple; sermons, small groups, short courses, longer study, mentoring, apprenticing etc.

² The Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary estimated 34,000 denominations in 2000, rising to an estimated 43,000 in 2012. These numbers have exploded from 1,600 in the year 1900. www.theway21stcentury.wordpress.com/2012/11/23/how-many-christian-denominations-worldwide/

Providing a safe place for fellowship and worship includes the Lord's Supper. We celebrate Holy Communion – in order to remember what Jesus has done for us, celebrate his presence with us now through the Holy Spirit and remind ourselves that he is coming again.

We are also to care practically for the poor – among ourselves and wider. Remember James' words "Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"— but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless." James 2:15 - 17

All of this needs to happen in an atmosphere of honest love. Love is not love if it is dishonest. Being overly polite, overly nice, helps no-one.

Unity is a key component of being the church. Jesus great prayer for unity in John 17 spells out that unity consists of joy and holiness. It comes about as we are protected by the Father. Celebrating unity doesn't mean that we are all the same. Rather it means we value our differences and allow the Lord to use those differences to work together.

Reflection questions:

- Who are the people who have inspired you in the Christian faith?
- What does being part of the Christian family mean to you?

In the light of John 17 -

- What does it mean for us to be a holy people, different to those around us?
- How can we dwell more in Jesus and his Father so that the world will know Jesus has come?