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People have been asking if I enjoyed my holiday. I did enjoy my time away, but it was not a holiday; I set for myself a rigorous schedule of reading, writing, reflection and study, something I have done almost every year, for many years. It is a very precious and valuable time.

Last Sunday when Nick was leading the service here, we worshipped at Broadwater Baptist Church in Worthing where Jason (classmate and good friend) is Minister. Also met David Judkins who visited us in August last year and told us of their church planting ministry in central France, known locally as *l'Eglise au tour de la table* (the Church around the Table).

Sunday before that, when George was leading the service here, I worshipped at Minehead Baptist Church, a lively church, the entrance of which looks like a little cottage, but when you enter, it is cavernous! Over coffee after the service, 91-year old Peter Ashford who farmed 175 acres for 62 years, offered to take me around Exmoor. The following day, he took me on a 50-plus mile journey through Exmoor, up high mountains, down into deep valleys where for miles, the road was wide enough for a single small car. When we did see oncoming traffic, Peter would say, *Isn't God great Kalyan. Every time we need space for two cars to pass, He provides it, otherwise we have the road to ourselves!*

As we drove around he pointed to farms and named the present and previous tenants, what they farmed, whose daughter married whose son and other intimate details of the families of Exmoor.

Then we stopped at a very scenic spot. *This is where I proposed to my wife,* said Peter. *I told my then lady-friend to bring sandwiches and I would bring tea in a thermos. We had blankets in the boot of my car, and we came to this the most scenic place in all of Exmoor for an important event.*

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Honestly, I have not spent such a relaxing and fascinating day in a **L-O-N-G** while.

Today we bring to a close our series, ***The Building Blocks of the Church***. We started with the Word of God which is the foundation of the Church, Jesus the Christ its Cornerstone, the Holy Spirit like the damp course which safe-guards the building from rot and decay. We the people are individual bricks which makes the church (not the building, but the church), and prayer being the cement which holds together the church. We also examined ***fellowship, belonging*** (as opposed to *membership*), and the significance of both ***giving AND receiving***.

The final characteristic we shall examine today is ***witnessing and proclaiming***.

The book of Acts is extremely significant in two ways. **First**, it oozes a sense of urgency. In the beginning, God told Abraham, he would bless him and through him, bless the whole world. The "*children of Abraham*" have been a tremendous blessing to the world in the arts, in sciences, in music, in medicine. God will be true to His promise that the "*children of Abraham*" will be a blessing to the world, in the way He planned for them, but the book of Acts gives us the sense that time is running out. We get the feeling that the Apostles were expecting Jesus' return in their lifetime, and since then, in every generation, the reading of the Book of Acts of the Apostles, conveys the urgency that Jesus will return in that generation.

In Acts, we read of the Apostles criss-crossing the Roman Empire, and some going even further afield: Thomas accompanied by Bartholomew travelled to Persia to India, Bartholomew returning to Armenia; Matthew went to Persia and onto Ethiopia; Philip travelled across north Africa to

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Carthage¹, a fascinating book I read during my time away, which presents evidence and points to further study needed on this area that Christian theology was well developed across North Africa, from the Nile Delta (Alexandria) across to the western end, which helped shape the emerging church in Europe over the next 200 years.

Just to clarify before we go on, **Apostles**, are not restricted to, "The Twelve". When Peter stood up and said that Judas the Iscariot's place must be filled by someone who *accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when He was taken up from us, one of these men must become with us a witness to His resurrection*. There were many others who were part of the entourage travelling with Jesus from His Baptism until His ascension, all witnesses of Jesus' whole life, who can also be called Apostles.

All these Apostles possessed a sense of urgency, to make sure their first hand experience of being with and learning from Jesus, had to be conveyed, first to the Jews who had missed recognising Jesus as the promised Messiah, and when they did not care to listen and respond, to as many other people as possible. I don't think the world has seen such a flurry of urgent missionary activity as happened during the first 60 years since Jesus' ascension, as recorded in the book of Acts.

The **second** thing of significance in the book of Acts, is that the Apostles were practising, living, applying everything Jesus taught them. They followed this pattern of **Witnessing** and **Proclaiming**, they learned from Jesus' teaching.

¹ "How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind" by Thomas Oden (2007) IVP Books

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In His early teach on a mountainside in Galilee, Jesus blessed those who faced all kinds of difficulty in life, before dealing with the contentious issues of the day, a series of *You have heard it said..., but I say to you...*

Three verses which transition from the Beatitudes to the Sermon on the Mount read as follows: *"God has placed on you here to **be** seasoning like salt which brings out the rich-flavours God has filled His earth. If you lose your seasoning (saltiness), how will people taste Godliness?, because without this God-given seasoning, everything you do, has no more value that to be trampled on and made dust.*

*God has also placed you here to **be** light, showing the world the rich beauty of all God's creation. God is not a secret to be kept hidden. Go public, as public as a city on a hill. Now, if I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm suggesting you hide under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a lamp-stand, on a hilltop. You don't have to **do** anything, just **let** My Light shine through you! How do you do this? Keep an open house; be generous with God's blessings; by opening up to others, you will prompt people to open up to God, who is our very generous Father in heaven."*²

Note, Jesus is not asking us to **do** witnessing and **do** proclaiming; He says *you **are** the salt of the earth ... you **are** the light to the world; therefore **be** salt and **be** light.*

We must believe and have confidence in who we **are**. We are made in the image of God, and He expects us to live His life in us.

Back to Exmoor! Late in the afternoon, 91-year old farmer Peter Ashford and I stopped at Alice's³ for tea. Alice and her husband are members of Minehead BC, but cannot attend Church on Sunday morning as they keep

² Matthew 5:13-16 (MSG)

³ Not her real name

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the tea room open. People talk behind their back, that they should honour God and not trade on a Sunday, but God has different plan for Alice and husband who meet, talk with and discuss matters of life and death with people from all walks of life, many of whom have experienced changed lives from conversations in the tea room.

Alice served us a delicious cream tea and sat with us as it was near closing time. Only God knows why she opened up and shared very personal details of her life. Her only child, a son, brought up in Sunday school and Church, was a committed Christian. On his 17th birthday, friends invited him to join them at Butlins where a friend bought him a "*happy pill*" for a fiver. The lad had never taken drugs or alcohol or smoked a cigarette. Not knowing he had to break a small bit and place it under his upper lip, he swallowed the whole pill. Four days later, he died.

Alice was distraught and went into severe depression. Some time later, she met her brother whom she knew was an agnostic, and she noticed a change in him. She asked what happened, and he went on to tell her how after her son's death he was depressed until one day someone asked him to church, and there his life changed.

Alice asked him what made him turn his life around, and this was his reply, *I realised, being a Christian was not about ritual, it is about a relationship with God, made possible through Christ!* He had walked away from the church because it taught and demanded adherence to ritual which he found meaningless, until he was introduced to the person of God through the person of Jesus, and then he understood, the Christian life is about a relationship with God the Father through His Son Jesus the Christ. By this time Alice was in tears and she said, *These are happy tears, Kalyan. I*

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*know my son is in heaven with His Lord whom he knew. **I had to lose him to realise, being a Christian is not about ritual, its about relationship!***

This is the message of the book of Acts. The urgency with which the Apostles went about with their message, first in the synagogues, then the marketplace and then all over, was exactly what Alice said, *It's not about the ritual we have all become accustomed to, at the Temple, sacrificing animals and offering of money and serving around the Temple; its about God's personal invitation to enjoy a relationship with Him, through Jesus the Christ.*

I will focus on one incident in Acts which illustrates this. In chapter 17, Paul arrives in Thessaloniki, and as was his custom, goes to the Synagogue. Over three Sabbaths he reasoned with them **from the Scriptures** (not his own arguments) and tells them about the risen Christ. Then he says, *this Jesus whom I proclaim is the Christ!* Paul is witnessing to them - *I am telling you about Christ who changed my life around.* Some of the Jews were persuaded, many devout Greeks (gentiles) were also persuaded, and not a few of the leading women of the city, understood their Scriptures, that they were being called to a life-long relationship with the living God, not to a life of performing rituals.

Paul is hurriedly hustled out of Thessaloniki because once again, the Jewish religious leaders used rabble-rousers to strike him down. Paul travels via Berea to Athens where he waits the arrival of Silas and Timothy.

While waiting, Paul walks around the streets of Athens and feels an oppressive spirit around him, when he recognises source of this feeling: on every street and in every street corner was an idol! Athens was full of idols!

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As was his custom Paul goes to the synagogue to reason with them from Scripture, and also strikes up conversations in the marketplace, *witnessing* to them from his own life, telling them what God had done for him. Luke says, *He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection*⁴, no doubt telling them his own experience of seeing the resurrected Christ. Paul was being the seasoning, giving them a flavour of God from his own life.

Then one of them asks, *May we know more about this new teaching you are presenting to us - it is strange to our ears.* They first tasted the flavour of the risen Christ, so Paul launches on his famous speech, *"Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about. He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since He is Lord of heaven and earth, He doesn't live in man-made temples, ..."*⁵

You see, the Church has grown since the first three thousand people repented of their wrong thinking in rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, and over 2,018 years, is growing in numbers which no one can count. Just because the media says the Church is not growing in Britain, does not mean it isn't. It is growing here as it is elsewhere, all over the world.

The Church is growing among people who accept the Word of God is its foundation, Christ is its cornerstone, the Holy Spirit perseveres with us to protect and guide us. The Church is where we practice true fellowship, where we are made to feel like we belong, and where giving and receiving is practiced with joy.

⁴ Acts 17:18

⁵ Acts 17:22-26

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But practicing all this would be to maintain the status quo. The Church has grown and continues to grow, **ONLY** when people are convinced and have confidence that they **are** seasoning salt witnessing the fragrance and flavour of God in their lives, that others may taste and want to be a part of it, and they **are** light to the world, showing the glory of God, in whose image they are made.

This is the story of the Acts of the Apostles in the generation following Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. Their message to their world, is the same message to our world - being a follower of Christ (being a Christian) is not about following rituals, its about having a relationship with the living God, through the risen Christ.

AMEN.