

We meet here in this building every Sunday at the same time – what impact does our meeting together have on the community around us? Does our gathering have any impact. If we were to keep our doors closed throughout the summer, yes, we would be at something of a loss, some of the regular visitors we have over the summer might possibly notice that we weren't open, but would anyone else even notice?

It's quite a thought-provoking question isn't it...

These last three weeks spent back in the book of Acts we see a very different church with a very different impact on the people and the authorities around it. We picked the story up two Sunday's ago with Peter and John being released from prison because they had been preaching in the name of Jesus. It wasn't just that they had been preaching in the name of Jesus but the impact of their preaching was such that the pair were arrested – not because people found them offensive, but because the authorities had a genuine fear and could see that people were starting to believe what they were being told about Jesus.

Where did this power to change things come from, why did the church have such an impact on the people around them – it was because the church was at prayer. We talked about Peter and John returning to their own people, the church, fellow believers and together they prayed.

The impact of the gospel wasn't just in preaching; it was in how people were choosing to live. Lives were being changed. Last Sunday we read the story of Ananias and Sapphira and that culture that was developing in the church of sharing possessions, meeting the needs of one another. This culture was borne out of the Christians taking God seriously. Understanding the importance of honouring God above all else and the way Ananias and Sapphira fell down dead was a warning that God can't be mocked, or fooled, or tamed in anyway. There was a healthy fear of God within the church and people could see this and they respected it.

This morning's passage is another example of the impact the church was having on the world around it. The opening line tells us: ***The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.*** (Acts 5:12)

Solomon's Colonnade was a large outer porch in the temple. It was part of the court of the gentiles, a place in the temple that anyone could use to pray. The church it seems has had to move to this outer court because they have outgrown the smaller inner rooms that Jewish men were allowed to use, and presumably because so many gentiles were also coming to faith, and they would not have been able to access those inner parts of the temple.

This is a growing church, and the growth is centred on the central planks of the apostles' steadfast determination to talk about Jesus and their commitment to prayer. This resulted in a display of signs and wonders, healings and driving out of demons – not designed to make the church impressive or the apostles special, but a demonstration of God's power that came from a willingness to make everything in the church, everything in life about Jesus. It wasn't just that this church talked about Jesus or prayed through Jesus – they lived Jesus. He was at the heart of everything.

This total centrality of Jesus impacted the city of Jerusalem in two ways.

The first was that the authorities were frightened and made all kinds of threats against the apostles and against anyone who would run after them. Increasingly the Jewish foundations of the Christian faith were being denied by the authorities as they sought to create more and more distance between what they saw as true Jewish religion and this new preaching about a resurrected Jesus.

As a result, some people saw what was happening in the church, they heard the threats being made against the church and so they decided it wasn't worth risking the wrath of the authorities and so they kept their distance. **No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people.** (Acts 5:13)

The second impact the church had was very different. **Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.** (Acts 5:14) Despite all the opposition and fear that surrounded the church, despite the very real threat of arrest faced by the apostles the church continued to thrive because they continued to keep Jesus at the centre and because they continued to find strength, hope and common support in praying together.

There is a myth in this country that we are not allowed to talk about our faith, we are not allowed to talk about Jesus, that we are not allowed to offer to pray with people. Even if that were true our response ought to be the same as Peter and John who said **Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.** (Acts 4: 19-20)

It is no secret that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is going through incredible change. We are having to face up to the reality that people aren't coming as they once did, we don't have the ministers to fill anywhere near the vacancies there currently are.

At the heart of the problem is the fact the church has had very little impact on local communities for a long time. This isn't because people are frightened to come to church, it is because when they look at the church they don't see anything that is authentic, in which they can believe. Is this failure to see something real because we have removed Jesus from the centre of our churches, we have lost the importance of praying together. That the power people saw in the temple in Jerusalem is missing today.

Because this power is missing so there is another knock-on effect in the church. This passage ends with us being told that as a result of the people seeing this authentic life in Christ, a life with Jesus at the heart of it and prayer in the centre of it so people were bringing those who were ill that even Peter's shadow might fall on them because they were being healed.

There was an expectation in the church and from those who could see what the church was like that God would do incredible things. Is it that because we have moved Jesus from the very centre of our church and our lives, is it because we have lost the importance of meeting together for prayer, our priorities are in other places that we have lost our sense of expectation. We don't really expect God to do anything, we don't expect people to come to faith, we don't expect lives to be changed, to be healed, demons to be cast out.

If we don't expect these things why would anyone else expect these things. If there is no expectation of God to do these things, why do we have an expectation that people will come and be part of something that in reality only meets on a Sunday for some kind of quaint gathering... has the church lost its power because Jesus has lost his place in our hearts?

Throughout the book of Acts it is the leaders of the church, the Apostles who set the example. They are the people who have the courage to stand up to the authorities, they are at the heart of the proclaiming of the name of Jesus, they are at the heart of the prayer of the church.

So, like last week, the first challenge is to our leadership here in Portstewart Presbyterian. It is to the eldership, which I am part of, it is to the committee because you are part of the leadership. Have we as a leadership team lost sight of Jesus, have we lost the centrality of praying together. Are we setting the example to the rest of the congregation, does the community see something authentic and powerful in us, do we have an expectation that God would rise up and do something incredible?

Do we need to think about how we structure our meetings, our priorities – do we need to learn once more what it is to confess the name of Jesus Christ.

To the rest of us, is this really something we can leave to a select few who have been given responsibility for leading us. Do we confess Jesus in our lives, do talk about our faith with friends and family, have we listened to the authorities who we think are telling us that faith is private and not for public consumption, or will we obey God? What have we said is right?

Where is the place of prayer in our lives – what is it that stops us from being part of the prayer time before church or coming this evening to our Prayer and Praise. Do we have an expectation that God will actually answer our prayers, is our lack of expectation reflected in our lack of prayer?

The good news is that God has not abandoned his church, he has not stopped working in his church, he has not stopped transforming lives through his church. Is it that this time of change and humbling for the church is God calling us back to what we are supposed to be. Is he calling us back to honouring Jesus above all else, before all else and demonstrating this through how we pray together.

I believe that God is stirring us, I believe he is preparing us for something incredible – but the first thing is that we would become the church we are supposed to be by putting Christ at the heart and prayer in the centre because this is where the power to impact our world will come from.