



We are The Church!

Prepared by Kathryn Bedford

Across the Lands Getty music

You're the Word of God the Father
From before the world began.
Ev'ry star and ev'ry planet
Has been fashioned by Your hand.
All creation holds together
By the power of Your voice.
Let the skies declare Your glory;
Let the land and seas rejoice!

You're the Author of creation;
You're the Lord of ev'ry man;
And Your cry of love rings out
across the lands.

Yet You left the gaze of angels,
Came to seek and save the lost,
And exchanged the joy of heaven
For the anguish of a cross.
With a prayer You fed the hungry;
With a word You calmed the sea;
Yet how silently You suffered
That the guilty may go free!

With a shout You rose victorious,
Wresting vict'ry from the grave,
And ascended into heaven,
Leading captives in Your way.
Now You stand before the Father,
Interceding for Your own;
From each tribe and tongue and nation,
You are leading sinners home!



Prayer

Lord of all creation and Lord of all mankind,
we gladly bow the knee before you today.

You reign over all the earth and we invite
you to reign in us, your people who
together form a living building in whom
you dwell.

Thank you for that cry of love which
envelops us through The Gospel; we ask
that your cry of love would ring out across
this land and across the world through your
church.

May your love comfort those who grieve,
give hope for the future for those who are
anxious and shine light into situations
where people are sad, frightened or in
danger.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen

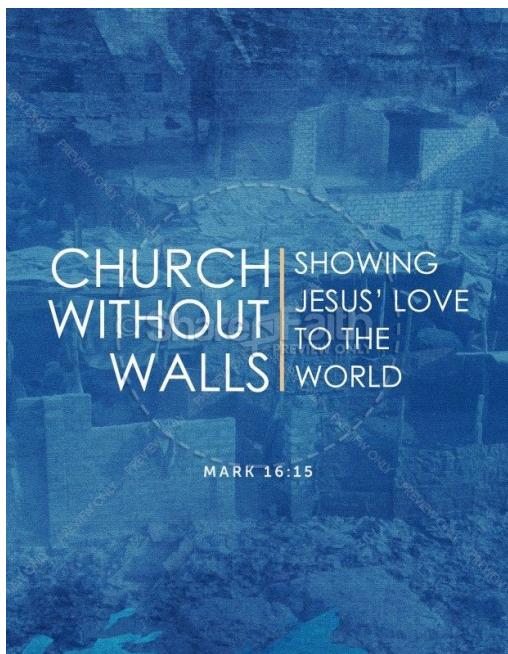
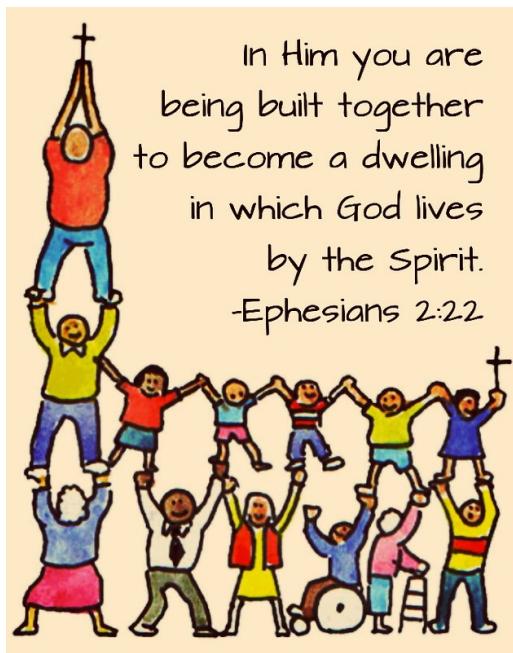
This season is really bringing home the fact that church is not a building! We knew that anyway and often remind ourselves that we, the people are The Church, not the venue. In our case the local school or the community centre where we hold our services and other community outreach events.

So if church is not a building and it's not an event that we go to, we have a real opportunity at the moment to re-discover the essence of church which The Bible tells us is ***constructed from Living stones and being built into a spiritual temple in which God dwells by his Holy Spirit.***

It's not about going to church, it's being the church.

This is so true, but after 7 weeks in lock-down, we are really starting to miss the being together, the fellowship part of being church, the meeting together as the body of Christ.

Please don't think of The Church as being closed or suspended - The Church is never closed!



We are familiar with praising and worshipping in different places. We've been part of praise and worship with other churches in the town centre, and parks. We've had prayer meetings on Birkrigg Common overlooking the town. We've held Baptism services on the shores of Lake Coniston. In fact, the last time we did so, a lady just 'happened' to be passing by on her paddle board as we held our service by the water's edge and sensed God speaking to her. That lady is now part of our church, and is going to share some of her story later on in the summer.

We are The Church! But, how does that work when not only is our usual building off limits, but meeting together is also off limits.

This season is an opportunity to explore what it means to 'BE' The Church.

I want to begin in a bit of a back -to- front fashion by summarising this message in a nutshell at the beginning rather than the end, so here it is ...

- ◆ We are deeply loved by God and we need to know that and keep experiencing it to thrive.
- ◆ The Gospel /message of Jesus tells us beyond doubt that we are loved through his words and his actions.
- ◆ Within that message is the power to change us, change our communities & the world
- ◆ When we get a handle on that message, know who we are as the church and who Jesus is as 'our head', we can change the world!

I hope that sounds as exciting to you as it does to me!!



In order to explore further, we're going to have a little look at the church in its earliest days and ask 4 questions.

1. **What defined them?**
2. **What empowered them?**
3. **What impact did they have?**
4. **What about us?**

And so let's head back to the very early days of 'The Church' which came into being somewhere around AD33. It's a new era, an era that is the **fulfilment** of numerous prophecies and promises which told of a **Saviour** whose Kingdom was coming.

That Saviour has now come, he's abolished the old temple worship system with its sacrifices by sacrificing himself to pay the price in full for the curse of sin and that's for the world; he's broken the power of death and returned to his Father. His Kingdom is now here and he has commissioned those eye witnesses to take his message to the world. **They are the brand new church in seed form!**

Reading– Acts 2: 42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ 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, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.



1. What defined them?

Let's highlight from that reading what defined them as 'The Church'.

We find them **meeting together** to **praise and worship** in the Temple Courts, a cloister known as Solomon's Colonnade. The Temple is still here at this point although around 40 years later it was destroyed on the orders of the Roman emperor, Titus. They are meeting in peoples homes to **break bread together/take communion**, and also just to **share meals** together and for the joy of doing life together in **community/fellowship**.

They are defined by **prayer**, powerful, effective prayer resulting in wonders and miraculous signs which caused the people to be in awe and resulted in others being added to them. They are **meeting needs**, sharing their stuff, selling their stuff where necessary so that needs could be met. They are devoted to **the apostles teaching**.

In Matthew 28:18 Jesus charges the apostles **to teach the believers to obey everything he has taught them**, so we see that the apostles teaching is the continuation of the teaching of Jesus. Notice Jesus doesn't want people to be informed of his teachings, but to be taught to **obey** them.

As we read on in the story of the early church, we see from these believers that **obedience** required great discernment at times in the face of false teaching. We know from history that **faithfulness** defined them in hard times and **endurance** and suffering.

2. What empowered them?

What caused those early believers, whom we saw a couple of weeks ago as a frightened bunch of people hiding in an upstairs room, to become a rapidly growing, empowered, bold, and joyful people devoted to this new kingdom even at the expense of their safety and in some cases, their lives?

I think it was a powerful combination of several things.

- ♦ the outworking of The Gospel in their lives
- ♦ The power of The Holy Spirit
- ♦ obedience to their commission
- ♦ an awareness of the authority delegated to them by Jesus



♦ the outworking of The Gospel in their lives



The overwhelming conclusion from a gospel where The Creator lays down his own life to redeem the human beings he created is that each and every individual is loved and has immeasurable value!

These believers had encountered that love in person, and experienced the wholeness, the lightness, the empowerment, the courage and security that comes from knowing you are truly loved by someone who is all powerful, all-knowing and ever present.

When the gospel impacts you, that same passion bubbles up within you towards others and begins to work itself outwards in ways that impact the world.

♦ The power of The Holy Spirit

Just before Jesus returns to his Father, he gives a commission to this new church, but it's a commission with a clause attached!

Matthew 28: 18

'Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and surely, I am with you always , to the very end of the age'.

The commission is massive; to go to all nations and make disciples. But he also says something else – here's the clause! Hold on, just wait because in a couple of days you will be receive my power and my presence to go, do this!

Acts 1:8

**But you will receive power
when The Holy Spirit comes
upon you; and you will be my
witnesses in Jerusalem and in
all Judea and Samaria and to
the ends of the earth.**



We know The Holy Spirit did come at Pentecost and ignited these people with inner fire.

- ◆ **obedience to their commission**— where the gospel is lived out, there is The Kingdom!
- ◆ **an awareness of their authority**— they knew in whose name they operate!

3. What impact did they have?

As this church made up of ‘living stones’ carried their definition, and obeyed the teaching of Jesus, the outworking of the message of The Gospel spread and had a profound impact starting with The Roman Empire itself.

‘The glory of the gospel is that when the Church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it. It is then that the world is made to listen to her message, though it may hate it at first.’

Dr. Lloyd-Jones

Pagan practices were confronted with Jesus teaching concerning...

- ◆ the importance of the family,
- ◆ the status of women,
- ◆ the sanctity of life as made in God’s image
- ◆ the sinfulness of sexual immorality

The value of human life as demonstrated by the church caused even Roman Emperors to outlaw some of the barbaric de-valuing and destruction of life that was embedded into their culture; for example, leaving unwanted babies, particularly baby girls in the forest to be eaten by wild animals, the branding of criminals, crucifixion and the termination of brutal gladiator contests.

As The Gospel spread into other cultures, it drove back many evil customs and brought light and hope where before there was only darkness. The ceasing of child sacrifice to false God’s for example and the practice of burning widows on their husbands funeral pyre.

The Teachings of Jesus, as noted by historians have continued to influence culture wherever they have spread. Christian love blossomed into hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and care for the poor, the hungry and homeless. Even many of the greatest universities were originally founded for Christian purposes. Although critics may say that Christianity impeded the growth of science, history says otherwise.

Dr Rodney Stark, a professor of sociology and comparative religion states, **‘the leading scientific figures in the 16th and 17th century overwhelmingly were devout Christians who believed it was their duty to comprehend God’s handiwork. The God of The Bible was a rational being whose creation operated on laws that were discoverable and could be applied to solving problems for the benefit of mankind, an understanding essential for the rise of science’**

Wherever we find freedom, progress in medicine, real advancement in science, laws that protect human rights and fairness, good education, the ending of the slave trade, breakthrough and discovery, stunning music, art and literature, outstanding skill and artistry, somewhere within it is the outworking of The Gospel



4. What about us?

We've looked at the definition, the empowerment and the impact in the world from these early believers. Over the centuries, many who faithfully continued in the teachings of Jesus carried the flame through some very dark times.

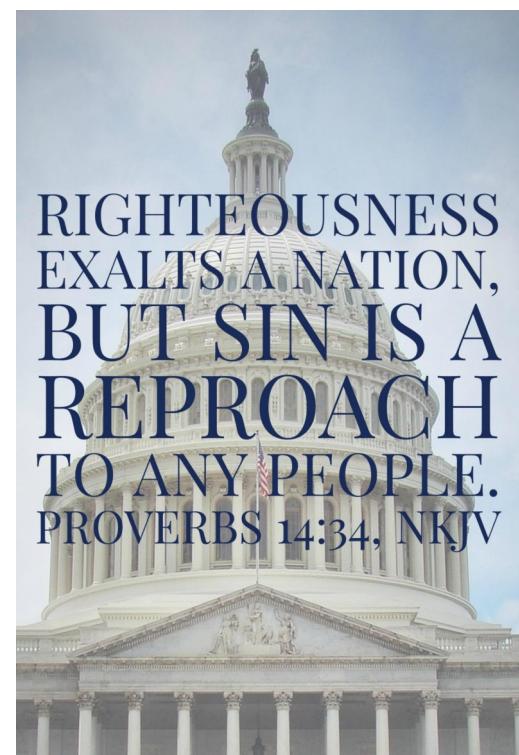
Sadly many atrocities have been committed in the name of Jesus by people who were **not** defined by his love or obedience to his teachings, and yet somehow, somewhere the flame continued to burn in the lives of faithful believers.

So, what about us? Do we want to be 'in step' with all God is doing and allow the flame to burn brightly? Sadly, for now, we see a falling away from the teachings of Jesus and a corrosion of his values in our nation .

Sadly, we see churches today, where maybe there's a tiny spark just smouldering and others where the spark has gone out and the doors have closed.

We also see in our nation churches who **are** rising Up and moving in a fresh anointing of The Holy Spirit. We see huge gatherings of thousands of Believers at places like Spring Harvest, New Wine and others, seeking God in order to impact our Nation for God's Kingdom.

Throughout The Bible, wherever anyone comes to God in **humility** and sincere **repentance**, God does something new!



More than ever we need to rise up and **BE** the church, so the flame can burn brightly and the ground be claimed back for the Kingdom of God as the Master Builder, God himself places more living stones into his dwelling here on the earth.

While we are temporarily being ‘The Church’ at home, let’s use this season to really examine ourselves and where we are in our relationship with God.

Do those characteristics that defined the early church define us?



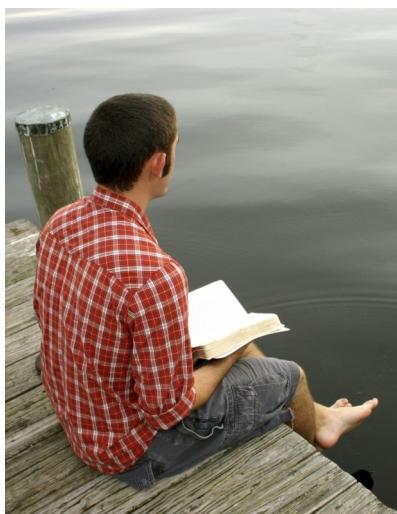
Is our **worship** sincere and from the heart? Sometimes our worship requires an element of sacrifice in that maybe we don’t feel like worshipping or we’re busy doing something else, but when we pause to worship even if it’s on our own, we can experience The Holy Spirit inhabiting our praise and aligning our hearts with truth? As we sing out and declare the majesty and holiness of God and speak truth into our lives, our circumstances, our families and communities, it changes the spiritual atmosphere!



When we **pray** in his will and in his name, we bring all that Jesus is into the situation we are praying about and things change!

When we take **bread and wine**, even at home during this season, we remind ourselves of the price that was paid for us; of the value we have and the value placed on all human beings.

As we **commit** ourselves to read and study the **Word of God**, we find ourselves encountering **The Living Word**, Jesus who by his Holy Spirit shines a light on **his teachings** and gives us the strength and power to live them out, impacting the world on his behalf.



As we invest our time, our skills, our stuff and our finances into **meeting the needs** around us, we proclaim through our actions the incredible gospel message that each individual is loved and precious to God .

When we get together again as a church family, may these characteristics modelled by the early church really define us as we meet to **BE** The Church here on Croftlands.

And a final thought...

It's important to remember as we embrace being The Church, who is actually doing the building and who it belongs to. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus states, '**I will build MY CHURCH**'.

He is building His Church with Living Stones; that includes us and all our brothers and sisters in this town, in our nation and throughout the world who believe that Jesus Christ has come into the world in the flesh and is the Son of God. We find that in 1 John.

So if he is building his church, **where is he right now?** I scanned through around 100 references this week, which tell us exactly where he is. He is seated at the right hand of God.

What is he doing there?

If I'm honest, I spent many years thinking he was just sitting there doing nothing much; maybe censoring a few prayers before handing them over to God, but otherwise just waiting around for history to run its course. How wrong I was!

He is at the right hand of God, the place of highest favour, power and sovereignty. He is reigning, ruling, conquering, reconciling, overcoming, saving, interceding!

1 Corinth 15: 20-28 tells us that as the gospel is preached and his kingdom expands , his enemies are increasingly placed under his feet.

Ephesians 1 20-23 is worth a read. It says that God...

‘...raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms,²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.’

Why did God appoint him to be head over everything? For **the church!**

Who are the agents, the ambassadors, through whom Jesus is reconciling the world to himself? **The church!**

How is the darkness defeated and the world changed? Through Jesus building **his church** and operating through **his church**, making his appeal to the world through **his church** as he dwells by his Holy Spirit within this spiritual building crafted with the living stones of men, women and children. **Wow! Does that cause the spark within you to leap into flame?**

We can confidently step up into being 'The Church'. He is already appointed head over all things for his church to rise up and claim the ground.

Incidentally, even today: who is it that in the main has either founded or is running ...

- ◆ The nations foodbanks?
- ◆ The nations toddler groups?
- ◆ Youth clubs?
- ◆ Refuges and safe houses for the abused?
- ◆ Soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless?
- ◆ Drug rehab centres?
- ◆ Ministry into prisons?
- ◆ Child sponsorship programmes in places of poverty?
- ◆ Schemes to feed the hungry, provide clean water and sanitation?
- ◆ Organisations to rescue women, girls and children from the sex industry? Etc, etc

In the main, it's individuals, organisations and charities who form The Church. It's the outworking of The Gospel which says each life is precious.

Are you excited to get together again and step up into this awesome position and honour of being The Church? To explore together the ways that Jesus is asking us to claim this ground, so that he can craft more living stones into his church.

**We will never
change the world
by going to church.

We will only
change the world
by being the church.**

Take some time to pray , asking God to soak you in his love and fan into flame the outworking of the gospel in your life .

Be still and listen to what God may want to say to you.

May God bless you