**Acts 4:23-37**

**The Church: A People with a Purpose**

What is the point of the Church? Why do we do what we do? Can we make any real difference in our community and in the wider world?

 These are fair enough questions for us to ask ourselves because there are millions of people in our country today who are questioning the purpose and effectiveness of the Church, and even more who don’t ask the questions because they believe the Church to be completely irrelevant anyway.

 But if we want to be effective as a Church, we need to ask ourselves the most basic questions of all so that we can be sure about who we are and what we are trying to achieve.

 We know that we are to be a Mission-Shaped Church - but how do we actually become that?

 Over the next 5 weeks, we will have a series of sermons on the nature and purpose of the Church; what we are here for and how we can fulfill our purpose. We will be looking at a series of stories from the book of the Bible called the Acts of the Apostles, which charts the history of the creation of the Church in the first three decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

 And I want to start today with this story we’ve just heard read from Acts 4 because this passage clearly shows us the most fundamental truth about the Church; that it is founded on the power of relationships in a two-fold direction, if you like; a vertical relationship between the believers and God and a horizontal relationship – the believers with one another.

 This passage shows us really clearly that if we get our relationships right, then we will be able to be Church in a way that transforms ourselves and transforms the community in which we are located. Being effective and purposeful as a Church begins with getting our relationships right.

 But before we get into the passage itself, let’s just think about the context of when this event occurred.

 We pick up the story in Acts just as the disciples Peter and John have been released from prison. They had healed a man at the gates of the Temple and the religious leaders were upset by this because these disciples had claimed that they had healed the man through the power of Jesus Christ, and the religious leaders took this as a threat to their own authority. So they had been arrested and put in prison and ordered not to preach Jesus Christ anymore. But Peter and John refused to follow that order, saying that it was more important for them to obey God than to obey the courts.

 And outside the courthouse, in the streets, there were thousands of people praising God and celebrating what they were seeing through the ministry of the disciples and so the authorities knew they had to release Peter and John. So they released them. And we pick up the story where Peter and John have returned to the rest of the disciples and are telling them what has happened.

 And the rest of the disciples would have been really afraid, wouldn’t they? Not long before, the religious authorities had come for Jesus, arrested him, falsely tried him, and executed him on the cross. And now, here they were coming after the disciples. They had arrested Peter and John. So how long would it be before they were all arrested, and perhaps executed too?

 They would have been in fear for their lives and, in the midst of their anxiety, they desperately needed to be reassured as to what their purpose was.

 At this point of history, we in Enfield do not fear being arrested or executed for our faith - although many of our brothers and sisters around the world do face that possibility on a daily basis, of course. But perhaps we need to be reminded of what our purpose is as a Church, in a society that often sees our faith as marginalized at best and completely irrelevant at worst.

 So how did the disciples regain a sense of perspective and purpose? How are we to do the same? Verse 24: “And when they heard these things, they lifted their voices together to God…”

 The first thing they did together was pray. And if we are to truly understand our purpose together as a Church, we too need to gather regularly to pray and lift our voices to God.

 And what did these disciples pray?

**1. The sovereignty of God in mission**

Quite simply in their prayer, they first acknowledged the authority of God over the world. Their primary focus was on the sovereignty of God, verse 24: “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?’”

 The starting point for the disciples in reaffirming their sense of purpose was to focus on the sovereignty of God over all the world and draw on some verses from Psalm 2 in order to reaffirm in their own minds that God has always been sovereign and always will be sovereign.

 And for us, as we move forward as a Mission-Shaped Church, we need to be absolutely convinced that God is sovereign and Lord; that even though we live in a world that increasingly ignores God or denies his existence, none of that alters the reality of what is.

 St. Andrew’s is not a club to be joined. St. Andrew’s is not just another Community Group where like-minded people can come together to enjoy social activities and mutually support one another. First and foremost, St. Andrew’s is a body of believers; a community founded on the strongly-held belief that God is the King of kings and Lord of lords and that we are to worship him and serve him as he works his sovereign purposes out in the world that he has created.

 The sovereignty of God is the most foundational belief that we hold, and our sense of mission is born out of that.

 Our Mission Action Plan is not just a bringing together of ideas about what we think would be nice things to do. Our Mission Action Plan is a reflection of what we think God wants to achieve in us and through us over the coming years.

 It is God’s mission, not ours. Which is why our Mission Statement on the inside of the pewsheet is quite simple: “Building community together on the values of Jesus”.

 And because these first disciples realized that their ministry was founded on the sovereignty of God, and not on their own strength, they were then able to pray with boldness that the work of God should continue. In verse 29, we read these words from their prayer: “And now Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

 If they had been acting in their own strength, they would have been so afraid of the authorities and the society in which they lived that they would have given up and gone back to being fishermen again. But they were relying on the sovereignty of God and that really comes through in their prayer here – look at the language they use: “We are *your* servants” “We speak *your* word” “*You* stretch out *your* hand to heal” “Miracles happen in the name of *your* servant Jesus”. Their Mission Action Plan was all about God and it was carried out in the power of God, not their own power.

 And so it is with us. We have boldness to pursue our Mission Action Plan because we believe that it reflects God’s Mission Action Plan for Enfield and beyond. And if it does indeed reflect God’s mission, then how can we possibly fail?

 We can be bold and confident and purposeful as a Church here at St. Andrew’s. God’s will be done…Not mine or yours…but God’s will be done.

 So, firstly, we understand our Purpose as a Church by building on the sovereignty of God.

 Secondly, we understand our Purpose as a Church by building strong relationships amongst ourselves and modeling the power of relationship to others.

**2. The importance of relationships for mission**

The nature of human relationships has changed far more in the three decades of the existence of the Internet than perhaps throughout all the rest of history added together. We can have hundreds, even thousands, of friends on Facebook. We can hundreds, even thousands of followers on Instagram. The one person I share most deeply with about the struggles of my own ministry is someone who lives in Australia, who I have never met before, and I have no idea what that person looks like or sounds like because we support one another over regular e-mail contact.

 Social media has transformed the nature of relationships largely, I think, for the better.

 But there is still the need, of course, for face-to-face relationships and for the mutual sharing of lives in the proximity of a community that lives and works and plays together.

 And the power of community was at the very heart of the purpose of the early church, as this passage from Acts 4 shows us, in verses 31-34, which say this: “The place in which they gathered together was shaken…the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common…there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold…and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

 Now that is a completely radical approach to community relationships, isn’t it?

 A wholehearted commitment to the well-being and encouragement and support of one another. An absolute letting go of any sense of individuality, and a complete recognition that self-identity can only be found in the power and reality of the community.

 Now, there are many historical and cultural reasons why such a situation could no longer exist. And I am not advocating for one moment that we should seek to establish that sort of a community here at St. Andrew’s where we sell all our houses and possessions and give the money to the PCC account so that the Wardens and I can distribute it more fairly amongst us. I’m not sure that is a very practical way forward for us as a church!!

 But I do think there is a principle here that we should aspire to. And the principle is one of sacrificial self-giving so that the community of St. Andrew’s can thrive and prosper and thereby model a different way of being than is common in society today.

 The mantra of so many people is “Look After Number One”: that is not a value of Jesus.

 The mantra of so many people is “Charity Begins at Home”: that is not a value of Jesus.

 The mantra of so many people is “Respect Needs to be Earned”: that is not a value of Jesus.

 The values of Jesus are looking out for the needs of others; giving sacrificially of our money, time and emotions so that others can prosper and being completely respectful and non-judgmental towards others as a default position, without that having to be earned first.

 Now that is a counter-cultural way of living.

 That degree of community love would shine out into the world as a wonderful example of what can happen when people gather themselves around the message of the Gospel and, as our Mission Statement says, “Build community together on the values of Jesus”.

 So this passage teaches us two important principles about being confident in the Purpose of our church here at St. Andrew’s.

 First, we are community founded on the sovereign will of God: not pursuing our own agenda in our own strength but pursuing his agenda in his strength, the strength of the Holy Spirit.

 Second, we are intent on modeling good relationships: relationships that are self-sacrificial and looking out for the good of others.

 If we are confident in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other, then we can move forward confidently and with a deep sense of purpose as a Mission Shaped Church.