The Vibrant Church
Acts 9:31-43

I think if you asked the average person in the street who doesn't go to church, why they don't, it wouldn't take long before some criticism of the church came out, would it? They don't go because of some scandal in the church, or the seeming hypocrisy of it all, or its fixation on stuff that they disagree with, or the infighting, or simply its irrelevancy to life.

And it doesn't take a great deal of insight to realize that things shouldn't be like that. You see, if the good news of Jesus really is good news, it should result in something good, in lives and communities being transformed. In other words in healthy, vibrant, living, dynamic churches.

Which is exactly what Luke tells us was going on in the days of Acts. And this passage we've just read is really the combination of an epilogue and a prologue. The young church has been under attack and persecution, but despite that, Luke tells us in v31 that the church came out of it strong and healthy and growing in depth and in breadth, and that's the epilogue to what has gone before.

But then we get these two accounts of miracles at the hands of the apostle Peter. And they form the prologue, as we're going to see, for what is coming next, which is the gospel going to the gentiles.

And I say all that because healthy churches aren't just a nice sideshow, are they? Both then and now, they are crucial for seeing the gospel spread, and for people to encounter Jesus.

So we're going to look at 5 characteristics that Luke gives us here, for a strong, vibrant church.

And the first hallmark of such a church is that it is:

United
Now, where do I get that from? Well, look at v31 again, where Luke says, 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace.'

And I think that's fascinating, because you've got three very different regions there. You've got Judea – strongly Jewish; you've got Galilee – land of the gentiles, with its mixed population, and you've got Samaria, which you're average Jew would walk miles around to avoid entering. And within those regions you now have multiple churches. And yet Luke doesn't say, 'so the *churches* throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria…' he says, 'the church.' One church. Multiple congregations, but one, united church. No doubt they were different, because Jerusalem Jews and Galilean Jews and Samaritans were different, but they saw themselves as one church.

And healthy, vibrant churches are going to do the same. There is going to be this interconnectedness at the level of the heart, that for all the differences, where there is this common commitment to Christ and the gospel, there's going to be a loving, charitable, gracious, one-hearted attitude to our brothers and sisters in other churches.

But that attitude isn't just going to be for those *outside* our church but also toward those *inside*. You see, Luke says that these churches 'had peace'. Saul the persecutor had been converted and, at least for the moment, times were easier. But in the Bible this word *peace* means more than just the absence of conflict. It implies the deep, almost tangible presence of God in relationships.

Now I reckon that some of the most distressing medical problems people can suffer from are what are called auto-immune diseases, like rheumatoid arthritis, or SLE, where the body's immune system attacks its own body. It mistakes friends for enemies.

And it's inconceivable that Luke could say that these churches had peace if they were wracked by internal conflict. And a church that is taken up with infighting is never going to thrive, any more than an army that aims its guns at its own men is going to win many battles!

But when we treat one another with the same love and grace and forgiveness and mercy with which Jesus has treated us, it's going to have a profound effect on the life of a church community. And rather than pulling in a 101 different directions, and squabbling and infighting as a result, a church that's going to thrive is one where there's going to be this genuine unity around the vision: this is what we're here for, this is what we're going to pour our energy into, and it's not fighting one another, it's making the good news, the gospel of Jesus known, and living that out; it's spreading the fame of Jesus' name; it's loving not backstabbing one another.

But the second hallmark Luke gives us is of a church that is being:

Strengthened

Verse 31 again, 'so the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.' Now, how does that happen? How does a church get built up? Because Luke isn't talking here about growth in programs and endless meetings is he? He's not talking about growth in complexity, but about the inner life of the church, about a growth in depth and in godliness. So how does that kind of growth and strengthening happen?

Well, on one level is the role of leaders. Luke tells us in v32 that Peter 'went here and there among them all.' So Peter obviously undertook a kind of preaching tour, visiting these churches and teaching them. And as John Stott said, to be a healthy church, a church 'must be a learning church'. As Paul would write later to the church at Ephesus, and say that God 'gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ' (Eph 4:11-12). So the role of leaders within the church is to equip its members and build up the body.

And yet we can't farm all the responsibility for our individual growth off on to others can we? Not even our leaders. That would be like me saying that I wanted to get fit, and build some muscle, and sending Jonathan to the gym to do it for me.

No, in his short little letter Jude writes, 'build *yourselves* up in your most holy faith' (Jude 20). You do it, you build yourself up, you strengthen your faith.

So, how can you do that? Well, in our homegroups we're just about to start a short pre-summer series in the Psalms. And if you're not yet in a group, now would be a great time to join one. And the first one we're going to look at is Psalm 1. And Psalm one gives a wonderful description of the person who has a strong, vibrant, flourishing faith. Listen to how the psalmist describes him: 'He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers' (Psalm 1:3). Now I don't know about you, but I want to be that kind of a person. I don't want to grow old and cynical and narky, I want to be fruitful in all the seasons of life, I want to stay green and vibrant, I don't want to just wither away.

Ok, so how do you get there? How does your faith and life flourish like that? Well, the Psalmist tells us: the person who's going to thrive like that tree, 'his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night' (Ps 1:2). The guy or girl who wants to build themselves up, and strengthen their faith, and have a vibrant, never-withering faith, is going to be a self-feeder. He's not going to be reliant on all these external inputs, he's going to get alone with God and feed and meditate on the word of God, and let it feed his soul as the water of the stream feeds the tree. It's why Jesus said, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.' (John 15:5).

And so a vibrant, strong church is going to be one where its leaders are feeding the flock, and where its members are building themselves up by feeding on Christ, as Christ builds them up.

But the third thing that distinguishes a healthy church is that it is:

Bold but Trembling

Look at v31 again, 'So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up…. Walking in the fear of the Lord.'

Now I think it would be fair to say that it is possible for a church, and us as individual Christians, to have a *misplaced* fear, to fear the wrong thing. Proverbs 29:25 says, 'the fear of man lays a snare.' Now think about that. It's possible, Proverbs is saying, to fear man in such a way that it lays a trap for you – it's possible to be overly concerned about what others think of you, or say of you, or might do to you, and that fear prevents you from doing and saying the things you should do and say as a Christian. In other words, the fear of man, the fear of what others think, makes you timid.

And it's a misplaced fear because the One we should really fear is God, not man. And when our fear is rightly directed, that it's what God thinks and says that matter most to us, then it makes us bold, not timid. Bold, because we know that God is for us, and ultimately his opinion is the only one that really counts.

But this boldness is going to be marked by a right kind of reverence – a kind of trembling reverence. You see there is a sort of boldness that's really not much more than brashness and cockyness, and I'm not talking about that. You see, if there is a tendency to fear man rather than God, there is also a tendency to trivialize God, and make him into little more than a tame house cat. But the Lion of the tribe of Judah is not a house cat. And a healthy church is one that knows where its fear is rightly placed and that makes it bold and trembling at the same time.

And Luke says these churches were '*walking* in the fear of the Lord.' It affected the way they lived, the way they walked through their daily lives. And just think how the fear of God does that. A church that fears God is going to be a church committed to and bold about spreading the gospel, as these churches were – because it's not paralysed by what others will think of it, but knows what really matters in life and eternity. A church that fears God is going to be a worshipping church, because it knows who really deserves the glory. And as you watch Peter kneeling beside the bed of Tabitha in prayer, the church that fears God is going to be a praying church, because it knows who possesses the power it so desperately needs. But the church that fears God is also going to be a church growing in godliness. Proverbs 8:13 says that 'the fear of the Lord is hatred of evil.'

Now, there is a sense, isn't there, that when you love someone so much, you really don't want to hurt them. You love them and you dread the thought of causing them hurt. And so at the centre of this fear of God is not terror so much as love – a deep, burning love for God that does not want to grieve him with sin, that turns from evil and pursues godliness in Christ instead – in a way that's going to be worked out in our relationships and marriages and families and places of work and study. And that kind of thinking and living is going to mark a healthy, vibrant church.

But the fourth hallmark for such a church is that it will be one that is being:

Spurred On

Now, where do I get that from in this passage? Well, Luke says, v31 again, that the church was 'walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit.'

Now what do you think of when you think of *comfort*? Snuggled on the sofa with a cup of hot-chocolate? Wearing a onesy in front of a log-fire? Lying in a hammock drinking some exotic cocktail?

Well, when Jesus described the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, I don't think he had that kind of comfort in mind, did he! He didn't say to the disciples, hey boys, I'm leaving you, but don't worry, I'm going to send One who will make your life really comfortable!

In 1066 Britain was invaded by the Normans. It was the first and last time we let the French do that! It was the Norman conquest, led by William the Conqueror. And William's half-brother was a guy called Bishop Odo, the Bishop of Bayeux.

And to celebrate their victory Bishop Odo commissioned the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts the invasion and Battle of Hastings. And Bishop Odo appears in the tapestry, riding his horse at the back of his men. And the caption above him reads, 'Bishop Odo comforts his men.' But interestingly he's not handing out hot-chocolate or giving them a good shoulder massage. He's brandishing a stick, spurring his men into battle.

And when Jesus told the disciples he would send the Holy Spirit after Him, he said, 'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Comforter, to be with you forever' (John 14:16). And that word Comforter means one who is called alongside to help. The one who will help you accomplish all that Jesus calls you to do. And that's what this early church knew, and what any healthy church knows: the presence of the Spirit - not to cosset us - but to equip us and encourage us, and help us and spur us on, to take the gospel into the world in word and deed.

But the fifth and final mark of a vibrant church is that it is:

Multiplying
Verse 31, 'And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.'

And the two stories of Peter and Aeneas and Tabitha tell us how it multiplied. Firstly, of course it was through the proclamation of the gospel.

Earlier on in Acts Luke told us that when Saul began persecuting the church in Jerusalem, the Christians were scattered into the surrounding areas, whilst the apostles stayed put in Jerusalem. But now that persecution has settled Peter moves out of Jerusalem and what he finds is all these churches that have been seeded throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria, just by normal people telling other people about Jesus. And what's interesting here, in light of what comes next in Acts with the conversion of the gentiles, is that the gospel is moving ever deeper into gentile territory. The area Peter is moving in, Lydda and then Joppa, were increasingly influenced by Gentile/Greek culture. And at this point in time, Joppa, where Tabitha was, was a Greek/Gentile city. So there is this spreading of the gospel outwards going on, and as a result, the church multiplies. And healthy churches are going to be engaged in that same kind of gospel spreading.

But there are two things in this passage that really lay the ground-work for the multiplication through proclamation that Peter sees here.

The first one is these miracles of healing. First is the healing of Aeneas who has been paralysed and bedridden for 8 years. Jesus heals him through Peter, and Luke says in v35, 'And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.' Then there's the raising of Tabitha from the dead, and Luke says in v42, 'and it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.'

Now, I reckon Luke very deliberately puts these two stories here, because in both of them there is a striking similarity between what Peter does and what Jesus did. Jesus healed a man paralysed for years and told him to get up and take his bed, and here Peter does the same. Jesus raised a little girl from the dead by saying '*Talitha cumi*... little girl… arise' (Mark 5:41). And here Peter raises a woman called Tabitha, and says v40, "Tabitha arise", which if he said that in Aramaic, as he probably did, it would have been *Tabitha cumi*, just one letter different from what Jesus said. So why these strong similarities, and why now at this point in Acts? Well, in the very next chapter an earthquake is going to hit the church. A Roman soldier, a gentile, and his whole family, are going to get converted and the church will never be the same again. And the man God uses to bring that about is this guy Peter. And Luke is telling us, look Peter has not gone rogue – it's Jesus who is working through him.

But these two healings also tell us that you and I shouldn't be hesitant to pray for one another. First of all, of course, someone just might get healed, but secondly because God might just use it to spread the fame of Jesus' name as he does here. And so James tells us: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up' (James 5:14-15).

But the second thing we see in this passage that paved the way for this multiplication was what this lady Tabitha got up to. I mean, her reputation went before her, didn't it? Verse 36, 'She was full of good works and acts of charity.' And when Peter entered the room where her dead body lay it was full of the vulnerable women she had helped, v39, 'showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made.' Very likely they're wearing them: these widows have been clothed by Tabitha. So here was a woman who used her skills and her resources to abound in good works. And if the first fruit of the Spirit is love, here you see love in this woman's life working itself out practically, multiplying good for others. And it's that abounding in good works that opened the door to the gospel and its multiplication in the lives of others.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism said, "Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can." Now why did he say that? And why does Tabitha deploy her time and skills and resources the way she did? Because the gospel impels us to turn from our selfishness, and do good to others, because God in Christ has done good to us.

And a healthy, vibrant church is going to be one where loving generosity in doing good to others is flourishing. And that in turn will open the door for the proclamation of the gospel, and multiplication will follow. As Jesus said, 'Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (Matt 5:16).