

VITAL SIGNS - CHURCH ATMOSPHERE

Have you noticed the temperature today? Varies, doesn't it, in here. Some weeks it's a bit chilly, where you want to keep your coat on, others it's hot! Last week I had my Norwegian pullover which I couldn't take off because I'd put on an un-ironed shirt (it wasn't Claire's fault) and I was cooking!

But a church's temperature is not just to do with heat. Some churches can have blasting furnaces but the atmosphere is decidedly cold! Maybe you've been to one. Everyone comes in at the last minute and sits down, closed-faced. The only looks given to a new person are looks of anger that "you're new here – I can tell that because you're sitting in my chair". Then everyone scuttles off at the end for fear that someone will talk to them. Other churches may not be so stuffily hot, but there's a warm atmosphere. Anyone new is welcomed and accepted. Everyone greets their neighbour as they sit down. And they stay and stay at the end, like the old Air Canada advert "service so good you don't want to get off"!

Atmosphere matters. A cold church will regularly lose members, and anyone daring to come in as a visitor will think twice before coming back again! They might never come to faith for that reason. PBC needs a health check on its spiritual thermostat just as much as any other church, even if we're not quite like my caricature (oh and by the way Wayne you are sitting in my chair do you realise?)

Where does atmosphere come from? Well, clearly a nice building, clean and comfortable accommodation help but they are just a tiny part of the equation. Scripture gives us a clue. Let's read from 1 Peter 2:4-5 "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

The stones from which an authentic, warm Christian community is built are the people – the living stones. But they are not built any old way. A viable church can only be built on the true cornerstone, the foundation, that is Jesus Christ, what Peter calls "the living stone, rejected by men but chosen by God". He was crucified and thus rejected. Then he was resurrected and therefore living. And then he was exalted by God –chosen.

We become living stones, like Jesus, when we put our trust in him. And then together we form a spiritual house, focused on God. We are indeed God's house. And wherever we meet in this building, or maybe in a small group, we are also a priesthood. That means we communicate with God to offer what Peter calls "spiritual sacrifices", through our faith in Jesus.

Let me explain spiritual sacrifices a bit more. A sacrifice is something we do which pleases God. In the Old Testament it often talks of a sacrifice of an animal as a burnt offering giving a "pleasing aroma" for God. We are not sacrificing animals but giving something of ourselves to God, to give a spiritual sacrifice, which pleases him in the same way. Our sacrifice is one for thanksgiving and communion. It's not very fashionable to sacrifice anything nowadays, a lot of the time it's about us and not about God. Something to reflect on.

Let me illustrate this point. Think of a cathedral, like Canterbury. Is the wonderful atmosphere of reverence and awe something that would be reproduced if a rich American built an exact copy, stone by stone, out in the Nevada desert? (Next to London Bridge perhaps?) I think not. The reverence and awe comes from centuries of Christian devotion, faith, teaching, prayer, worship and fellowship,.....to make up a place God loves to be, a holy temple. Spiritual sacrifices, made by the congregation as living stones, are, I believe, the fundamental basis of a healthy church atmosphere. When God loves to be present in the church, people will too.

Spiritual sacrifices. Can you give more detail, pastor? I think 1 Peter 4:7-11 helps us to understand what is involved in a church where God loves to be present. “The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

Peter was writing to churches suffering persecution under the Roman Empire, and from the local Jews. And we know from today that persecuted churches round the world are often our example. They show love of God and true fellowship, love and loyalty within the congregation that we can only aspire to. Just bear that in mind as I unpack this passage.

First, a church needs to be focused on God’s plans and not our own. The “end of all things” refers to the end times, when God will intervene again in history to make a new heaven and a new earth. We can easily forget this focus, as did the wicked servant in Jesus’ parable who abused his position when his master is away. Then, the atmosphere in a church can go sour. We focus on our own aims and desires, to the detriment of the destiny of the church, when we forget God’s plans.

Second, as Jesus said, “my house is to be a house of prayer”. As I mentioned, the palpable sense of reverence we get in a cathedral has a lot to do with the prayers offered through the centuries, like incense clinging to the hammer beam roof. And Peter is telling us that prayer is a further spiritual sacrifice, to be based on a clear and self controlled mind. As Wayne reminded us a fortnight ago, our prayers are part of our worship – and here’s a challenge. Do we pray enough? Do we pray enough in small groups? And do we pray enough in this building? The 24 every 7 stopped in September due to lack of support. And yet when people pray 24-7 the prayer room becomes a place where people really feel God’s presence. Wouldn’t be great if there was often some people, like Anna in Luke’s Gospel story, who “worshipped night and day, fasting and praying” in this building? The key is always available, when the office is open – please take advantage of it.

I already emphasized that the church is a “spiritual house”. This can have a negative as well as a positive side. Some time ago when a group of us prayed in here, there was a definite impression of a “spirit of criticism” present in the church. This does not

belong in God's house. Prayers of deliverance can cleanse the church spiritually – another reason why prayer is so crucial. Why else would Paul devote Ephesians 6 to the “armour of God” and the threat of “Satan's schemes”? But like the church cleaning, deliverance can end up only having a temporary effect, I believe that people can return with “dirty spiritual feet” and the spirit of criticism returns. Here is something we need to watch – the atmosphere is easily soured by such a spirit.

Third, we must love each other deeply – the Greek word deeply means “at full stretch”. This is perhaps the most crucial spiritual sacrifice. As Jesus said in John 13: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Only with such love, inspired by Jesus' own love for us, will the church atmosphere be truly healthy. Only then will people marvel and say “how those Christians love one another” and want to be part of the church. As some of you know, there are a whole host of “one another” passages in the New Testament – admonish one another, pray for one another, carry one another's burdens..... I'll be recommending small groups do an exercise with them to see how our church measures up on them – watch the website.

To deepen love, Guy Chevreau suggests that churches – or small groups – could have “circles of blessing” where everyone declares their appreciation of one another. One after another, we explicitly honour someone in the fellowship. He suggests creative licence is needed when they come to someone grumpy like “I love the occasions when you smile, it means a lot to me”. Love is also deepened by simple appreciation, saying thanks for service, as we do now in the team blessings.

Then there's an addition – Peter says we must love because “love covers over a multitude of sins”. What this means is that we must forgive at all times, and bear with one another's' idiosyncrasies. Patient and loving acceptance are crucial. And loving others like that is a choice we can make – not something unchangeable in ourselves.

Guy Chevreau talks about a conference where he was told that an average small group is comprised of two leaders, eight members and an EGR. After much puzzlement, it was explained that there is always someone who irritates the life out of all the others by dominating the conversation, by interrupting others....so the others feel like throttling them. EGR, standing for extra grace required! But then when we reflect we must realize that we all need such grace! We are all EGRs in need of others' forgiveness, as well as God's! We are all problem people, we need love at full stretch! In a small group we all need to hold hands and say to one another “please be nice to me I'm an EGR”.

Guy also mentions that he was once disgusted to read a church leader saying “great churches get rid of problem people and replace them with solution people” – but the only solution person among Jesus' disciples was Judas! Peter himself no doubt remembered Jesus forgiving him, after his own EGR moment of denying Jesus after his arrest. Peter was clearly a problem person, and so are we!.

When there is no forgiveness then, as Hebrews 12 describes, a “bitter root” can grow among us, poisoning the spiritual atmosphere. We again soil the house of God with

dirty spiritual feet. Maybe we need to laugh more, not take ourselves so seriously in self pity and self righteousness, I'm convinced it's an antidote to such "bitter roots".

Love is a many faceted term. Jesus calls on us to love all of humanity, including those we dislike and are opposed to us, and not just our family and friends. The love a church shows is noticeable by the greeting a newcomer receives – as well as others on the margin. Are they welcomed and accepted or are they frozen out looking haplessly at the notices on the wall, while everyone else chats in tight little circles during coffee? That used to happen all the time to Claire and I in our first church in Tunbridge Wells. And I've seen it happen here too. Such lack of love can sour the atmosphere, make God feel a little less at home, offsetting any attraction from a beautiful sanctuary, powerful worship and well-directed preaching. As Guy Chevreau recalls "people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care".

But true love goes beyond a friendly chat. Peter goes on to emphasise the need for hospitality in a healthy church. Jesus defines Christian hospitality in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Do we know of people who are lonely, who we could invite to lunch? Can we help elderly or disabled people with shopping, and with chores like gardening and DIY? Can we visit those who are sick and pray for them? Do we do this ourselves? Or do we rely on others to do it for us? ("The church does community projects so why should I be hospitable?") Or, if we do help out, do we grumble about it.

When we were in Germany, Claire made a lovely woodcut with this verse on it "offer hospitality without grumbling". I wasn't a Christian then. Then, a man from our church needed accommodation as his family was going home, but he needed to do his job a little longer....so he stayed with us, Claire took her woodcut seriously....and he stayed, and he stayed. And he talked a lot, and he smelt a bit - rather EGR....and I grumbled! I realize now that grumbling when giving hospitality defeats the object – it's like the Proverb 23:6 "Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. "Eat and drink," he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments." So no grumbling either!

Hospitality needn't all be serious either. In God's house there is room for joy, as will be next Saturday at our Burns night barn dance (have you got your ticket yet?) Deuteronomy is well known as a serious, weighty book, but I love 14:26 "Use the silver (from the tithe) to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice." Let's have a party in other words, with "other fermented drinks" too – a great way to show love and care! Who of your neighbours are you bringing along to Burns night?

To build his spiritual house God endows us with spiritual gifts. And Peter emphasizes that we must deploy those gifts for the church atmosphere to be healthy – to “administer God’s grace in its various forms” as he puts it. Elsewhere in Paul’s letters there are long lists of such gifts. Here Peter focuses on two, speech and serving. “If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.” At a basic level this is telling us to watch our tongues – to not let the fly on the wall hear anything negative from us; to not give the spirit of criticism a foothold. But it also means that when we speak words of prayer, words of knowledge, tongues, prophecy, and preaching we must seek God’s mind, not interpose our own. That’s both in church and in small groups. Otherwise, a church can be led astray from God’s path, and ultimately vulnerable people can suffer spiritual abuse. Exceptional care is needed when speaking, for as James says, if we’re not careful, the tongue can cause havoc.

And then serving “if anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides”. Similarly to speech, if God provides the motor, serving will be rewarding to the giver and the receiver. We should serve by love for God and not from a feeling of obligation. Then the church will again be a place where God loves to be.

Peter concludes beautifully with an overall aim of all our activities of spiritual sacrifice. “so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ”. As living stones of the church, we must pray, love, forgive, offer hospitality, speak and serve and thus offer spiritual sacrifices to God’s glory alone. Not ours! The church will then and only then be the place where we and God himself love to be, where newcomers are made truly welcome, where those on the fringes feel included, where seekers after spiritual truth can find answers.

Let’s make PBC that kind of church, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Silence

And now as we come to communion, we shall remember Jesus’ own sacrifice for us, his ultimate sacrifice on the cross. To respond to this wonderful deed, our own spiritual sacrifices are ones of confession and thanksgiving, as we come to take the bread and the wine. Let me read from 1 Corinthians 11.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.