

The Church: God's People



Sunday's Scripture Readings

- **Ecclesiasticus 35:12-14, 16-19:** This reading emphasizes God's impartiality, noting that he will not favor the rich over the poor and listens to the pleas of the oppressed and the humble. The passage is a call to righteous humble action and prayer.
- **2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18:** Paul nearing the end of his life equates his Christian journey and God's purposes for him with a fight or race with the "winner" receiving the "crown of righteousness". He calls on followers to imitate his example and "fight the good fight" and keep the faith even through adversity so they may receive this same crown.
- **Luke 18:9-14:** Jesus Parable contrasts the self congratulatory prayer of the proud Pharisee against the meek, humble and repentant prayer of the tax collector. It emphasises the wisdom of the proverbs. (Proverbs 3:34)

"God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud"



Sunday's Gospel

Setting the Scene

- **Who were the Pharisees and Sadducees' ?**

The Pharisees and Sadducees were two prominent Jewish religious and political groups during the time of Jesus. The Sadducees were primarily a wealthy, aristocratic group associated with the Temple, while the Pharisees were more common, middle-class religious group who exerted great influence on synagogues and how the faith was practiced at this time. They emphasized the strictest interpretation of the law and traditions with a heavy focus on “outward” shows of righteousness. They often dressed in exaggerated forms of the traditional Jewish attire to show their importance.

- **Who were the Tax Collectors ?**

This reading takes place in a time when the Jewish nation was being ruled over by the Roman Empire. The Tax collectors were generally Jewish citizens who were considered to have “turned” on their own people in order to collect taxes from other Jews on behalf of Rome. They were considered the lowest of the low in this time period and widely hated by other Jews.

- **Interesting Facts:** The disciple Matthew (also known as Levi), the author of the Gospel of Matthew is recorded to have been a former tax collector who was called by Jesus. Though it does not appear in the text directly in many depictions it is common for this scripture to be linked with Jesus calling Matthew from his life as a tax collector to follow him.



Small Group Discussion Questions

What jumps out to you from the readings ?

What do the readings say about what “God’s People” are meant to be like and - conversely - what they are not meant to be like ?

Themes

Smallness – Humbleness

Understand their need for Gods mercy

Not Self Righteous

Not Judgmental of others

Those who profess to be followers of God outwardly can often be “far” from him spiritually.

Care and concern for those in sin – not condemnation.
Goes after the one who is lost



Summary of the Readings

The readings from Sirach and Luke share a common theme: Coming to God in prayer with humility and reverence asking for mercy.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector show that self righteous actions done with pride and judgement are not pleasing to God.

Instead, grace and favor are extended to those who come before Him aware of their need, their failings, and their dependence on His mercy. It echo's the sentiment of Jesus encouraging his followers to take the lowest place and become like little children.

Smallness in one's own eyes draws God's grace and favor.

Paul's scripture couples this humble and repentant sentiment with persistent action and effort to achieve the goals of the Christian life.

This contrast is not oppositional but rather complimentary. It speaks to the tension between lowliness and humility and resilience and effort, reminding us that the path to holiness involves both a humble heart and a determined spirit.





SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTION

What has been your own personal experience of God's people ?

- Perhaps in the past you have met people like the Pharisee
- Perhaps you have met people more like Jesus and his followers who showed kindness, care and compassion for those in need.
- Share your experience with those around, what you have experienced positively
- Discuss things you would like to experience in a community of God.

What has drawn you into this specific Community of God ?

- Was it a specific person ?
- Was it a specific teaching ?
- Was it a specific leader ?
- Was it an experience of Grace ?
- Was it an unexplained intuition or leading ?



THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF THE ...

- The Book of Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the early years of the church beginning at Pentecost (The coming of the Holy Spirit).
- The book is written by Luke who was also the author of the Gospel of Luke. These books could rightly be seen as Volumes 1 and 2 of the same book.
- It could also be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit due to its heavy focus on the Holy spirit's work and leadership.
- Only Peter and Paul's actions are covered in detail in Acts. Luke attributes the major events, steps forward and decisions of the early community to the action of the Holy Spirit
- In Luke's account, Jesus' last words (Acts 1:8) were that he would send the Holy Spirit to give power to his disciples to carry his message:
"To Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth"

Small Group Discussion Question:

- Why do you think Jesus' final promise in Luke centers on the Holy Spirit rather than instructions or doctrine?





Acts Part 1

First Half:

The focus is primarily on Peter and the spread of Christianity to the Jews and Israel

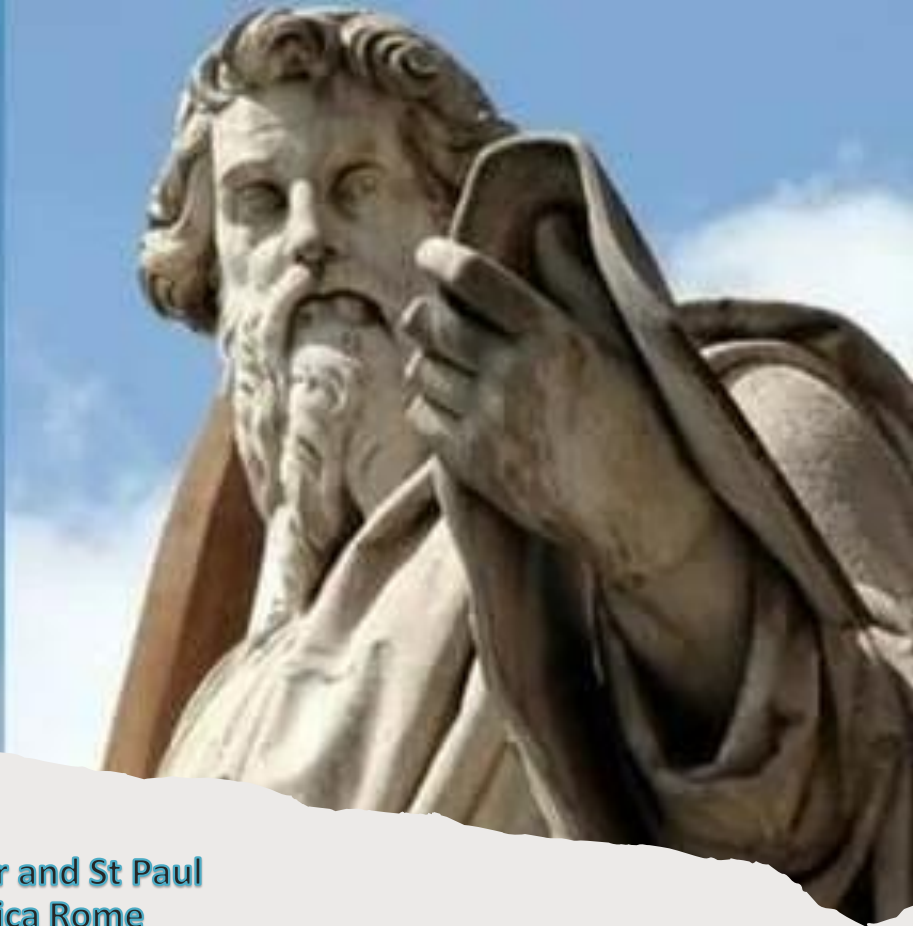
Acts 1:8 “You will receive Power from the Holy Spirit - You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria”

Acts Part 2

Second Half:

Focus switches to the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles (non Jews) primarily lead by Paul. We see the outward expansion of who are now considered “God’s People”

“and to the ends of the earth”



**Statues of St Peter and St Paul
St Peters Basilica Rome**

First Half of Acts: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria

This encompasses the “promised land”
The land given to Israel when they came out of
Egypt. (Location of modern-day Israel, Jordan)

It included 2 separate kingdoms:

- The Kingdom of Judah
Centred in Jerusalem (Gold)
- The Northern Kingdom of Israel
Centred in Samaria (Blue)

The Early Christian Church faces fierce opposition
from Jewish religious leaders especially Saul/Paul.
St Stephen became the first martyr, and many
others are persecuted or killed but the church is
strengthened by the spirit.



Pauls Missionary Journeys of Acts



This image is in the public domain

† Teach All Nations — Timeline of Expansion & Integration

- 1 c. 40 AD – Cornelius Converts**
First Gentile receives baptism and the Holy Spirit (Acts 10)
- 2 c. 42 AD – Antioch Emerges**
Becomes the new missionary center of the Church (Acts 11)
- 3 c. 45–48 AD – Paul’s Outreach Begins**
Evangelism spreads rapidly to Gentiles across the Roman world
- 4 Late 40s AD – Cultural Tensions Rise**
Diverse backgrounds challenge unity and religious practice
- 5 c. 50 AD – Jerusalem Council**
Apostles discern how to welcome Gentile believers
- 6 Decision: No Law of Moses Required**
Converts asked to follow only a few essentials (Acts 15)
- 7 Years Following – Unified Church**
Jews and Gentiles integrated as one Spirit-led family of faith

THE FIRST COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

- The large influx of new Pagan Christians causes challenges for the Church. The drastically different background of followers became an issue and decisions needed to be made about what practices converts needed to follow.
- The Apostles met in Jerusalem about 50AD to discuss and decide upon important questions of how to include and integrate these new followers.
- A momentous decision was made that Gentile converts were not required to follow the Jewish “Law of Moses”.
- As a compromise they asked converts to observe only a few requirements of the Jewish law *“For it had seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials.”*

Small Group Questions - Acts

- What does the rapid integration of Jews and Gentiles suggest about the adaptability of the early Church and the priorities of God and the Holy Spirit ?
- What lessons can our modern faith communities draw from this early moment of unity?
- Why did 'Gods people' only begin expanding outside the bounds of Israel after Jesus death and resurrection ?



IMAGES AND SYMBOLS OF “CHURCH”

**SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION PROVIDE
MANY RICH IMAGES TO SYMBOLIZE
CHURCH AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

**WE WILL EXPLORE THESE TOGETHER TO SEE WHAT
THESE IMAGES CAN TELL US ABOUT GOD’S VISION
FOR CHURCH**



**THE SHEEP FOLD
&
THE GOOD SHEPHERD**



**CULTIVATED FIELD / VINE / FIG TREE
OLIVE TREE**

'I AM THE VINE YOU ARE THE BRANCHES'

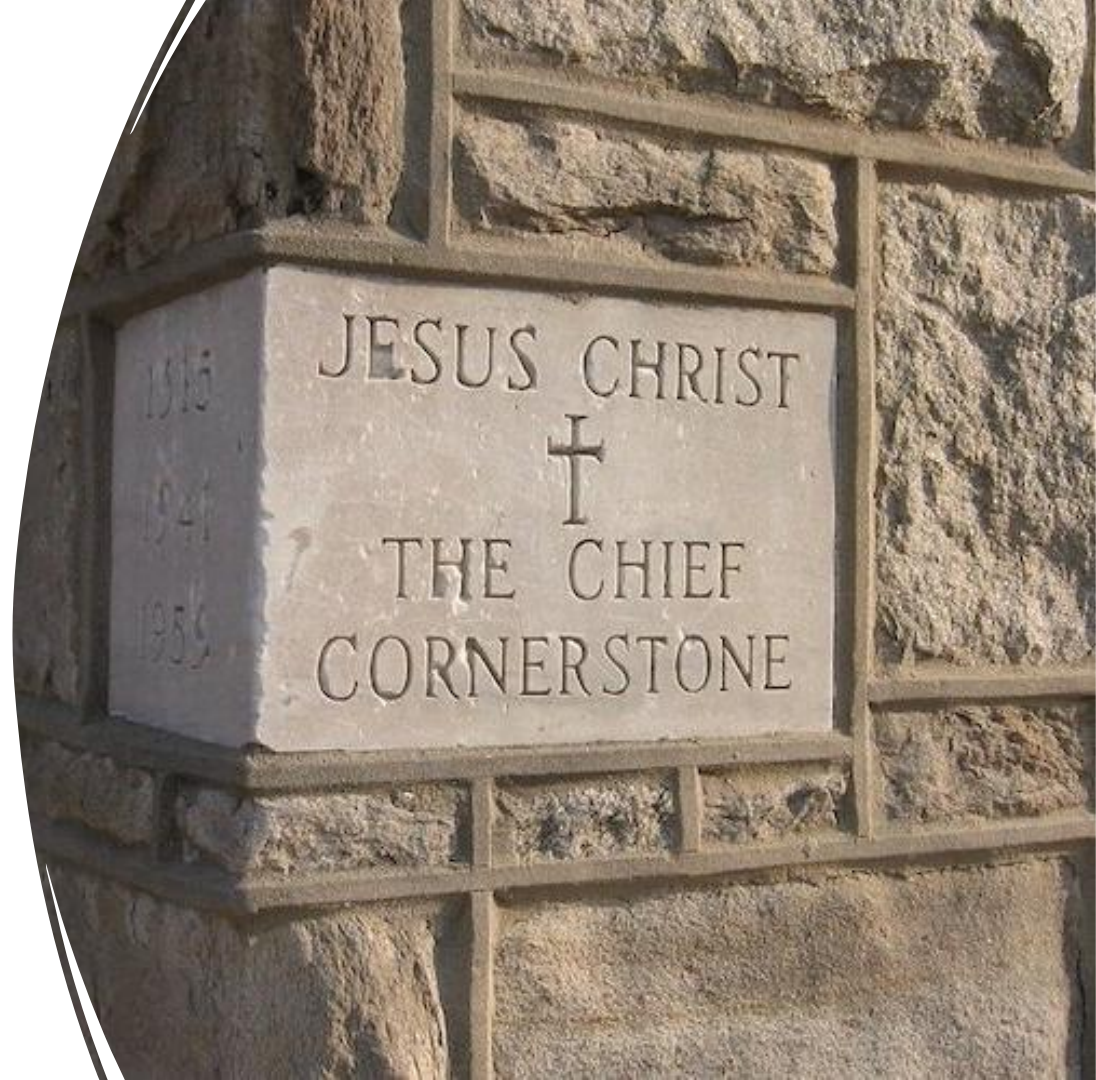


THE HOUSE / TEMPLE OF GOD BUILT WITH "LIVING STONES"

*'THE STONE WHICH THE
BUILDERS REJECTED HAS BECOME
THE CORNER STONE'*

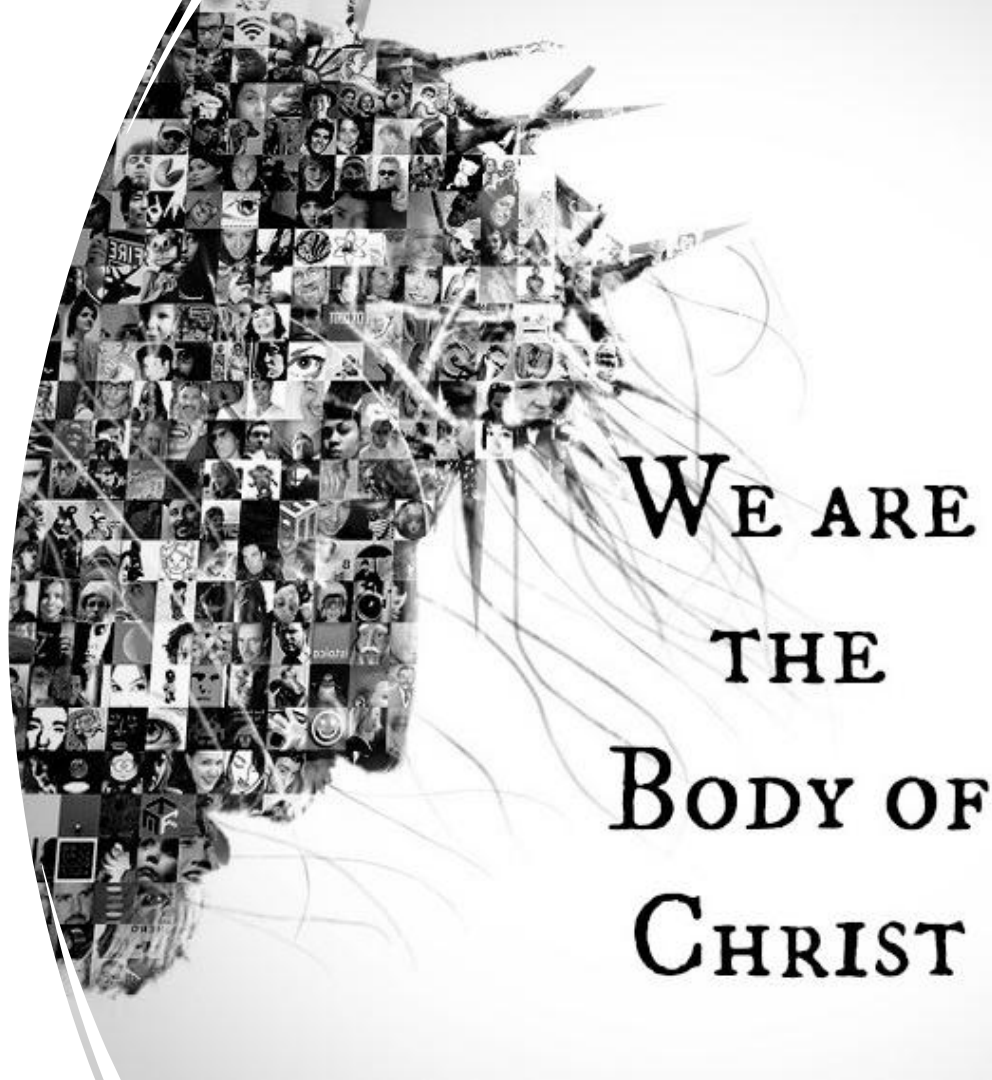
THE CATHEDRAL OF
ST^TSTEPHEN

150 *Years*



THE BODY OF CHRIST

'If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all the members rejoice together with it'



**WE ARE
THE
BODY OF
CHRIST**

THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

"For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."



THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Taken from Paul's Letters and Vatican II

A group of people in Exile who journey in a foreign land to their true home.

They seek the things of Heaven where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. The picture of a pilgrim people traveling to the "Promised Land"

**A NEW PEOPLE OF GOD MADE UP OF
JEWS AND GENTILES A PEOPLE WHO
COULD BE ONE NOT BECAUSE THEY
BELONGED TO THE SAME RACE
BUT BECAUSE THEY WERE BAPTISED IN
THE SAME HOLY SPIRIT**





Closing Prayer