

4th Sunday of Easter 26 April 2026

Acts 2: 42-end, John 10: 1-10

St James Church, Shirley. Eucharist

Sermon: 'A Flourishing Community'

It's a proven thing, that one of the strongest elements of human wellbeing, more than income, education, or even physical health, is the quality of our relationships. We are shaped by the communities we belong to. They can help us flourish, or they can diminish us. And most of the time, we don't notice the effect until something happens. Community is a gift and it needs attention and tending.

Our readings this morning invite us to reflect on what makes a community spiritually healthy: what helps it grow, stay safe, and remain focussed.

Worship

Acts tells us that the first believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching.... to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They gathered in the Temple, but they also broke bread in their homes. In other words, their worship wasn't confined to a building or a service. It was something that shaped the whole of their lives.

That's important, because Christian community doesn't begin with us. It begins with Christ. John's Gospel shows us why: Jesus is both the Shepherd who leads and the Gate who protects. He is the one whose voice gathers us, whose presence steadies us, and whose life holds us together. Without him, the flock scatters; with him, the community flourishes.

So the first mark of a healthy church is simply this: we keep listening for his voice. In Scripture, in prayer, in the breaking of bread, and in the quiet decisions of daily life. Worship is not just what we do here; it is the alignment of the whole of ourselves toward Christ.

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Gathering

Acts also paints a striking image: “All who believed were together and had all things in common... they distributed to all, as any had need.” This wasn’t a cult-like, but the natural outworking of love. They had discovered that faith is not a private possession but a shared life.

And that shared life wasn’t constrained. As Acts unfolds, the generosity of the believers becomes a mission to the wider world — feeding the hungry, caring for widows, lifting up the poor, and healing the sick. The community becomes a sign of God’s compassion.

John 10 adds another layer. Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” We often hear “abundantly” and think of blessing, joy, fullness. And that’s true — but it probably means more like ‘fullness’. Abundance/fullness includes the good and the difficult, the celebrations and the challenges. A flourishing community is one where people can bring the whole of their lives, the bright parts and the bleak parts, and know they will not face them alone.

This is why community matters. It is where we learn to carry one another’s burdens, to rejoice with those who rejoice, and to weep with those who weep. It is where we discover that the life Jesus gives is substantial and resilient.

Christ at the centre

John’s Gospel is full of contrasts: the true shepherd and the false shepherds; the gate and the thieves; the voice that leads and the voices that mislead. Jesus is clear that communities can be harmed from the outside — and from the inside. There are forces

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that “steal, kill and destroy,” and there are subtler dangers too: complacency, distraction, drifting away from what matters.

In this passage he is debating with the Pharisees, those pantomime villains from the gospel. And the scriptures are full of the bad shepherds that came in for such criticism in Jeremiah and Ezekiel and he's building on the good shepherds such as Moses, David, and Amos. God's people were sick of bad shepherds - many societies since have become sick of bad leaders - and there are still plenty around, as well as plenty of good ones.

Acts goes on to remind us of the importance of good leadership. The early church learned from the Apostles — from their teaching, their example and their discernment over how to move forward. And as Acts unfolds, we see the Holy Spirit guiding, correcting, empowering, and sometimes redirecting the community. Most of St Paul's time in his letters were trying to help leaders cope with what the Holy Spirit was doing. Managing a flourishing community has its challenges as well.

But leadership in the church is never simply human. It is always shared with, and shaped by, the Spirit of God.

And this is not just about those with formal roles. Yes, some are entrusted with particular responsibilities, and they must take them seriously. But the health of a community is the responsibility of all its members. We all listen for the Shepherd's voice. We all seek the Spirit's guidance. We all help to guard the flock.

Shirley Parish

Here in Shirley, we are blessed with a healthy, generous, and faithful community. It is something to be grateful for — and something never to take for granted. Communities flourish when

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they stay centred on Christ, when they gather to support one another, and when they remain attentive to the voices they follow.

And we don't have to look far to see how communities can fracture. It happens when division takes root, when leadership becomes careless or self-interested, or when people stop doing their part. It happens when a more sinister presence takes root. Sometimes the damage is dramatic and obvious; but more often it happens almost unnoticeably.

We're reminded of all of this today as our community marks St George's Day with the parade this afternoon. At its best, it's a celebration of courage, service and shared identity — something good, something unifying. But good things can be distorted if the wrong influences creep in. What begins as a celebration can be infected by fear, suspicion or exclusion.

The Christian task is not to reject what is good, but to guard it — to ensure that what we celebrate reflects the generosity, welcome and dignity that lie at the heart of the Gospel.

A flourishing community doesn't happen by accident. It grows when each person chooses to stay attentive, to contribute, and to keep Christ at the centre. And the same passage gives us a promise: the Shepherd goes ahead of us. His voice is trustworthy. His presence is steady. His desire is life — life in all its fullness.

So perhaps the invitation for us this morning is simple: to keep listening, to keep gathering, to keep contributing, and to keep Christ at the centre of our life together. If we do that, we will continue to be a community where people find pasture, peace, and a true spiritual home. **Amen**

Rev'd Richard Haynes 4th Sunday of Easter