

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Acts 2. 42-47)

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I said last week that, traditionally during the season of Easter, we read the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which presents itself as the earliest history of the Christian community. And what strikes me about this ‘history’ is not simply that it proclaims the event of Jesus’ resurrection and the good news of ‘salvation’, but that it lets us know what kind of life, what *practices*, the early church assumed must follow from the proclamation of resurrection. I am interested to explore the question of ‘why *these practices?*’ What do they suggest about how the first disciples understood the meaning of resurrection, and how might they help us live resurrection lives?

Last week, we focused on baptism and how this practice signifies an absolute letting go of the old structures of identity, the old self. Immersion in water is a kind of death, an undergoing of chaos and unmaking, so as to rise with Christ into a new humanity, with new possibilities for relationship with God, self and others. This week, we encounter another striking practice of this earliest Christian community – the radical fellowship expressed in the breaking of bread and holding all things in common.

Virginia Woolf said a problem with biography is that it presents the past to us and ‘all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank’ and ‘rather under life size’.¹ Reading the story of early Christian fellowship in *Acts* can feel a bit like that. We get a picture of an idyllic community, we watch them sharing common meals and selling their possessions to distribute the proceeds to any as had need. We see them

¹ Virginia Woolf, ‘I Am Christina Rossetti’, *The Common Reader: Second Series*, (accessed <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91c2/chapter20.html>, 8 May 2014).

held in great esteem by all the people and proving phenomenally successful as a mission agency. Yet they are somehow ‘sealed as in a magic tank’ – a bit like the characters in a fairy story. And, with the exception of a few radical and utopian experiments – Francis of Assisi, Tolstoy and the Anabaptists come to mind – the response of Christian history has tended to leave behind this apostolic form of life with a range of rationalisations – they were expecting the second coming almost immediately, this life was not sustainable in the long term, they didn’t live in the ‘real’ world in the way that we must, and so on.

Well, before we deal with our discomfort at the challenge this practice of radical fellowship might pose for us, let’s spend a moment considering the connection *between* this practice and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. What is it about the experience of Jesus’ resurrection that issues so quickly in *this* way of being together in community?

At one level, the ‘breaking of bread’ is clearly linked to early Eucharistic practice and follows from the institution of the Lord’s Supper narrated in the gospels. As we say in our liturgy, we break bread together because Jesus told us to. We are obeying a ‘dominical’ command. The scholars tell us, though, that in the early Christian communities, the Eucharist was always linked to a community meal (an *agape* feast)² and this suggests the practice of eating together is in the same kind of vein as sharing possessions in common. These are not just commands to obey, but expressions of a new kind of human sociality, a new vision for human community, which flow out of the proclamation of resurrection. So what are the links here?

When Jesus is raised from death and returns to his disciples in peace, he sets them free from the power of death, which includes the threats and fears that paralyse and diminish their lives. They *had* been afraid of dying and so of the authorities that wield death, but now they see there is life on the other side of death.

² Daniel Sheerin, ‘Eucharistic Liturgy’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, eds. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 711-743, 713.

So they become bold to speak of their experience, their actions no longer determined by fear of condemnation or rejection.

Similarly, they had been in competition with one another for social or religious status, for security, for being justified – either in their own eyes or the eyes of others – but now they see that none of that has anything to do with God. They have been acting as if there's not enough to go around, not enough life, enough security, enough 'good opinion' – but now they recognise that God wants only to give life and to liberate. There is no will to exclude in God, no will to punish, no will to short-change. It's like suddenly realising that you've been braced, perhaps half consciously, to defend yourself against some accusation or deprivation, only to realise that there's nothing to defend and nothing to lose. Everything is already given, freely and without conditions. All there is to do is to let go, accept, celebrate.

The experience of resurrection means that life begins to be experienced as abundance rather than scarcity, gift rather than possession; and other people begin to be experienced always as potentially friends, sharers in a common humanity, rather than as strangers, threats and rivals. In John's gospel, Jesus prays that his disciples will come to know how profoundly they belong to one another in the love of God: 'so that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one' (John 17. 22-23). In the Christian community in *Acts*, this prayer is being answered as the community discovers its existence and security sourced entirely in the gift of God rather than its own efforts or defences.

Given this experience of the deepest truth of reality, it's no wonder that the first disciples can so freely dispossess themselves of their goods to meet the needs of all. If the world is a realm of abundance rather than scarcity, then why cling to anything? And if other people are sharers in this same humanity and gift, then it is truly unthinkable that the common meal could be shared without ensuring that all are provided for. The practice of common life and profound mutuality in our reading

today follows directly from the revelation about the nature of God and reality, given by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

It didn't last long. By Chapter 5 of Acts, we are told the disturbing story of Ananias and Sophia, a couple who sold a piece of property but who kept back some of the proceeds 'and brought only a part' to lay 'at the apostles' feet' (5.2). Peter accuses them of having lied to God by this act of withholding and, sequentially, the pair drop dead. It's a painful piece of Scripture – but it illustrates, I think, the profound insight that what we keep back through fear of not having enough is an expression of death and scarcity having already colonised our lives. And the same falling away from authentic mutuality is evident in the Corinthian community, which Paul chides for its divisions and rivalries, and jostling for spiritual status. He asks them: 'What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Cor. 4.7) So much for the inhabitants of this idyllic apostolic world 'miraculously sealed as in a magic tank' and 'rather under life size' – these stories are fully contemporary, fully part of our so-called 'real' world.

So – what about us? What does the resurrection practice of radical fellowship and sharing, so fragile even in the New Testament, mean for us and for our life together?

For one thing, the very fragility of this practice points, I think, to the need continually to re-link our experience of life to the reality revealed in the resurrection, the reality of God's abundant giving and life. Without this being for us a live encounter, an experience of our own receiving of life from God, then our practices of sharing and fellowship either diminish (as in the New Testament stories) or tend to become formulaic, sourced first in moral effort and 'shoulds' rather than in the liberty of the Spirit, the energy of true communion. If this happens, we end up trying to do good rather than being partakers in God's goodness, and that has a very different effect in the world. So this suggests that prayer, the prayer of deep self-

giving and encounter with God's Spirit, is the necessary heart of authentic human fellowship.

As for what the resurrection practice of radical fellowship will look like for you and me ...

Sometimes it will mean acts of costly, risky solidarity. When the Nazis occupied Denmark, they ordered the Danish Jews to appear in public wearing yellow stars so that the process of segregation and ultimately deportation could get underway. With a response unique in Europe, the rest of the Danish population, led by the royal family, put on yellow stars too so that the Jews could not be identified. That's an instance of it. Sometimes this practice will mean giving away possessions or money or a space in our house to someone who needs it, or giving our time and attention so as to draw another into community and the possibility of friendship. And sometimes it will mean letting ourselves celebrate and receive from God and from others, eating *our* 'food with glad and generous hearts', letting ourselves be simply human and loved, no better or worse than anyone else, humble and thankful and blessed.

The practice of radical fellowship makes the life of the risen Christ known in the world because it enacts trust in and makes manifest the abundant freedom of God's life and love, through whose hospitality and mercy we are become sharers in the same life and love. This is the communion with God and with each other that we celebrate whenever we break bread together, showing that 'we who are many are indeed one body, for we all share in the one bread'.