

7 April 2018

Of One Heart and Soul (Acts 4: 32-37)

Easter 2

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There's an old saying, a kind of Christian 'dad' joke, you might have heard – Christ promised the kingdom of God, it says, but what actually came was the church (da da boom!!).

And yet, if you think about it, this is actually a deeply interesting, deeply challenging observation ... Christ promised the kingdom of God and what came was the church ... Once you get past the sense of funny incongruity (think of all the mismatched crockery, worn carpet and dysfunctional people), it suggests one of two things. Either we've been had ... or the church is (despite everything) pretty significant. It's the place, it's the set of practices and relationships that embodies God's way and makes it shareable. The community of Christ, our community, is where the promise of a new kind of life, a new citizenship, a new possibility for being and belonging is or is supposed to be fulfilled.

Well, I've sat through a few sermons on this theme – no doubt you have too – and it feels to me tricky, even dangerous territory. We've probably all had the experience of a certain self-consciousness in Christian communities. As soon as we're made aware of this calling to embody the presence and life of God, to 'be the kingdom we proclaim', we can start to feel rather special, separated out and subtly (or not so subtly) condemning the bad and ungodly 'world'; we can start being very self-consciously 'nice' to each other and rather scarily 'welcoming' to unsuspecting strangers. C.S. Lewis once described a 'charitable' person in these terms: 'She lived for others; you could tell the others by their haunted look'.¹ And something of this

¹ Cited by Rowan Williams in *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 2007), p.109.

oppressive, unnatural quality can readily characterize the church's way of being, our way of talking and our 'service'.

So getting too self-conscious about being the church and what it means to be a Christian community has its dangers. And yet, the question of community and what it really amounts to is something I think about a lot in relation to our life together at Benedictus. And it does seem an apt theme in this season of Easter. For – as we've seen from our reading tonight – the emergence of this new kind of community is the *immediate* consequence of Jesus' resurrection.

It begins on resurrection morn – Jesus is raised from death and the first thing he does is re-gather the scattered disciples, telling them to share the news with each other and then come together to meet him in Galilee. It continues with the preaching of the apostles. To proclaim what happened to Jesus and what's made possible through him, just is (as it turns out) to form community. There are no isolated or private converts – to come to believe is to be joined to the whole company of believers.

In the next few weeks then, I'd like to explore with you some questions to do with the kind of community we are and are called to be. And I'd like to invite your reflections on your vision for our community and your part in it, and to get real about some of the challenges and tensions of our context.

To begin, let me say a little more about the connection between resurrection and community. What is it about the events of Easter that leads so directly to the emergence of life in common?

For one thing, it's clear that Jesus died so that *all* might be reconciled and enlivened. He returns in the resurrection, not to pick out favourites, but to communicate mercy and freedom to everyone. We might not think of this as particularly remarkable – after all, we've come to expect this radical hospitality from him. What is extraordinary, though, is to see this same hospitality and mercy being extended by the apostles after they've met their risen Lord.

Take the episode when Peter and John are arrested for having healed a man in the name of Jesus and brought, after a night in the cells, before the elders and

scribes, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. This is the very court that recently condemned Jesus, so the apostles can be under no illusions about its power and willingness to dispose of those it condemns. What do Peter and John do? They begin to speak of God's offer of forgiveness and belonging. This Jesus whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead, they say, is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone' (Acts 4: 11). There is no will to exclude in God – God's invitation to new habitation is for all, including all of you who've been involved in rejecting and executing God's anointed.

For the apostles, it's as if, having recognized their own failures and complicity in the system that killed Jesus, been forgiven and called anew, they're now free from fear and able to recognize that Christ is for others in exactly the same way. All of us, St Paul rejoiced, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all of us are accepted anyway – for no other reason than God's like that, that's who God is (Rom. 3: 23). And really to know this is to see others as like you, all of us tending to be stuck and fearful and our own worst enemies, all of us yearning for love, hoping to belong, desiring to give – all of us wanted by God who seeks our healing and growth.

The community of believers is simply the community of those who share this knowledge, this experience. Of course, we can still annoy, disappoint and even hurt each other, we find some people more difficult than others. But what becomes possible as we pray and share life together, as we are ourselves healed and transformed by the love of God, is that we're more able to see one another with compassion, as God seems to see us – perhaps wounded and a bit prickly, needy and often anxious, but each of us with a unique story, with hidden depths and gifts we long to develop and share, each of us called to fuller wholeness and life.

'Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul', we're told in Acts. And what I think we need to take from this is they weren't just being nice to one another, tolerating one another as members of the same club, exercising their Christian will power. They were actually experiencing themselves as 'one in Christ' – recognizing their common call and need and vulnerability. And this experience then naturally found expression in their wanting to share the means of

life – so that ‘there was not a needy person among them’. So profound was their experience of being liberated and accepted by God, that they felt the need to hold onto nothing else – all was gift for giving, and ‘great grace was upon them all’.

We know, from later in the story of Acts and the letters of St Paul, that the life of the early church quickly got more complicated and ambivalent. We’ll see more of that next week. But that doesn’t mean this part of the story can be dismissed as just the naïve enthusiasm of early conversion. And a reason I say this is because I’ve seen something of this oneness of heart and soul, this desire to ensure each other’s needs are met – here at Benedictus. I’ve seen it at work in groups like Spiritual Practice, L’Chaim and Theology Reading Group, among our young adults at Kalchaino and at Kaleidoscope. I’ve heard tell of it in the Men’s Circle and Tuesday Meditation Group. All these are contexts, occasions where people gather to listen deeply to one another, being utterly for each other’s healing, truth, life. I’ve seen people who rub one another up the wrong way a little, and yet who commit really to work at ‘seeing’ each other, not just settling for a diminishing story or set of judgements or polite toleration. I’ve seen people looking out for each other, weeping with those who weep, and laughing with those who laugh, and desiring to share what they have to give for the building up of all.

Christian community is founded on the resurrection of Jesus and it is sustained through our continuing conversion by and into love – not the saccharine, falsifying, hypocritical façade of love but the real work of deep listening, generous presence and humility before the mystery of each other’s being. This Easter as we celebrate the resurrection, I celebrate our life together ... what it already is and what it may yet be. And this week, I invite you to reflect on how this is for you ... how you experience your belonging, your part in this – and to notice what comes up for you as you allow these questions to unfold within.