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Easter 4 (Acts 1.15-26)

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In the season of Easter – which runs for seven weeks from Easter Day to Pentecost – the New Testament readings given by the lectionary come from the Acts of the Apostles. Why? Because Acts tells the story of the beginnings of the movement that became Christianity. Acts is Part 2 of Luke’s gospel and gives an account of what happened among the community of disciples after the resurrection, how the apostles began to make sense of and to live their lives in the light of their experience in the company of Jesus who lived, and died and was raised from death.

It should be a great read but, in many ways, I find Acts a difficult and not altogether conducive book. Sometimes it’s frankly comical – as in chapter 12, when Peter is miraculously freed from prison by an angel and, having walked through the city at night to the house where many of the disciples are staying, has the door opened to him by a maid who is so astounded to see him that she slams it in his face and he has to keep knocking while those inside argue about whether it really could be him or not; and as in chapter 20 when Paul preaches for so long that a young man called Eutychus falls into a deep sleep and out of the window in which he was seated. He’s picked up three stories below by Paul who, rather casually, assures the concerned fellowship that the boy has life in him yet and carries on preaching until dawn.

More often, though, Acts is a devastating portrait of what human beings are so often like. There are those who oppose the embryonic new movement – both Jew and Gentile – mobs gather, charges are trumped up, kangaroo courts convened, and crowds mill about in confusion run by rumour. They seem to *want* to do violence, to

hurt each other – and haven't we seen that this week? Then there are those *within* the new movement who seem still enmeshed in many of their first century superstitions, who argue about the criteria for membership and fellowship, sometimes condemning or cutting each other loose, sometimes exhibiting what seems an alarming degree of self-assurance and righteous fervour. The painful rift between synagogue and church begins to emerge – a rift that has led to the unspeakable history of Christian anti-semitism. And even the stories of healing and teaching, in this book, often seem to lack the warmth and depth of those in the gospels, apparently told more to demonstrate the truth of the new Way, than to make visible the humanity of those healed. And I find myself wishing that this first book of the church had a different feel and flavour.

Yet, I wonder if the very unattractiveness, even chaos, of parts of this story is integral to its significance?

As Scripture, the Acts of the Apostles is profoundly different from something like the Upanishads of the Hindu tradition or the Koran or even the wisdom or prophetic literature in the Hebrew Scriptures and the parables of Jesus. In these literatures, God's meaning can be presented as something attained, something finished – the prophet delivers the word received, the enlightened one pronounces the oracle of wisdom, the gospel reveals who Jesus is. But in Acts, the meaning of God is being discovered through the process of its being *learned* by ordinary human beings, in the messy and complex business of human relationships and decision making and community organising; in the confusing unlearning of one set of assumptions and the dangerous process of learning to inhabit a new understanding of the world. And perhaps the great gift to us of this book, is that it does not pretend that this process is anything other than difficult and confronting. Such a process *will* make visible the limits of our sight and our love. it will not always be clear to us what God is doing or who we are becoming or what faithfulness actually looks like in particular circumstances. Acts shows us faith and therefore the church *as* process – a

process in which we (however much we may prefer it to be otherwise) are still necessarily engaged, entailing all the same vulnerabilities and mis-steps and mess.

Our reading comes from Chapter 1 of this story. A little earlier, Luke has given an executive summary of the story so far: 'In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen'. These apostles have now returned to Jerusalem after the last of Jesus' resurrection appearances and his ascension into heaven, and are constantly devoting themselves to prayer (Acts 1.14). 'In those days', Luke goes on, Peter led the gathered believers (about one hundred and twenty persons) into a process of discerning who among them should take the place of Judas as one of the twelve.

Let's recall for a moment Peter's theological context. He is a Jew, a son of Israel. And what he has learnt from this tradition is that God communicates to human beings in the words of Scripture, in response to prayer *and* in the life of a people, a community. How do you learn what God is like? Well, you look to the community of God's people. God shows forth God, God lets humanity know who God is and the way to its own fullest life, by calling a group of people to live in such a way that God becomes visible. That is why idolatry and disobedience is such a big deal for Israel – it's not just that you are being a 'very naughty boy' – it's that you obscure God, you make it difficult for others to see God. Instead of being a light to the nations, showing forth God's mercy and justice and compassion, you become a source of confusion or misunderstanding. Or, in Jesus's words to the Pharisees, 'you do not enter the kingdom yourself, and you block others from entering'.

In this context, then, when Jesus called his twelve disciples, it was both a pointed critique of the religious establishment and an astonishingly extravagant claim for the meaning of his own ministry. What it said, effectively, was that the twelve tribes of Israel in first century Palestine were failing adequately to communicate God's life to the world; a new twelve, a new Israel is being called forth

to make visible who God is. This group has been formed by sharing life with one they were coming to understand as having embodied the fullness of God's hospitality, healing and mercy, the Word made flesh. Now they are to be witnesses to this experience and to the way that leads to life. This is why it is necessary, as a sign of their acceptance of this commission and their understanding of what it means, that the first act of the gathered community is to reconstitute the apostolic number. And this is why it is necessary that the criteria for the one to be chosen is that they must have 'accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection' (Acts 1. 22).

The week just past is one of those weeks that makes the proclamation of God's presence among us, the proclamation of resurrection life, seem even more difficult than usual. The tragedies in Boston and Texas, terrible in themselves, serve also to highlight those that are almost background noise – the routine experience of bombing and violence in Syria and Palestine and Iraq, the sinking of yet another boatload of asylum seekers off the coast of Indonesia, not to mention to personal pain and suffering that are part of our own daily lives and the lives of those we love.

And in this kind of week, it seems to me, that the only way the church (we) as a community of witness have something to offer our broken world is by ourselves holding to the whole story of Jesus – his life, death and resurrection – and allowing it to become our story. The God made visible by Jesus, the God whose meaning the community of disciples has always to learn, enters and transforms human life in time and over time. There is no bypassing of the concrete, material, created world which is how we human beings can still so regularly fail to reflect God's life and do such terrible damage to each other; how human communities can so utterly eclipse the light of God and manifest only violence and disintegration and pain.

How do we embark on and keep faith with that process? The disciples, in all their mess and mis-steps and vulnerability show us the way – by devoting ourselves,

saturating ourselves in prayer. That is how we keep offering our lives to be formed by and so to reflect how God would live our life, and to be capable of inviting others to know that reality too, even in the face of what seems like overwhelming negation – as it must have felt to the disciples gathered in the upper room, a tiny islet in a sea of hostility, ridiculous, undignified and yet somehow irrepressible – hope made visible, love becoming flesh.