

### **Sermon for St John's on Fourth Sunday of Easter, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020**

I want, today, as we praise God for Christ, the Good Shepherd, who cares for his scattered flock, to reflect on that vision of Christian community that we find in our reading from the Book of Acts.

I wonder, for you, what vibrant Christian community looks like – whether you've experienced it at St John's, or in other times and places in your journey? Perhaps, like me, you've glimpsed it in the joy of remarkable residential; or in Christian life in other parts of the world; or in a church when everything seemed to be alive, the love of Christ transparent in all that was going on and in acts of loving service in the world? Or, perhaps, in less dramatic ways, you witnessed it in ordinary week-by-week faithfulness: in worship, in pastoral care of the sick and bereaved, in Sunday school activity, and in simply getting on with everyday work & witness, in the world.

And here are some examples from my recent experience: our St John's youth pilgrimage to Holy Island, time with the Anglican Church in Tanzania, a Diocesan youth pilgrimage to Taizé, a Parish retreat to Northumbria, and a Church celebration in my previous Parish in Leicestershire. And you will have your own stories...

Well, today, we're experiencing, aren't we, a time of unique challenge for our Christian community, as the lock-down continues... But maybe we're also experiencing a rare opportunity for reflection and prayer, in terms of what kind of future God might be calling us into, once we emerge from this time. Yes, on the one hand we're physically isolated, so community can feel more distant than ever.

But on the other hand, we're noticing that invisible bonds of community & prayer are stronger than ever - as we remain united, as we reach out to other people, as we pray for the vulnerable... What will Church look like, when the lock-down ends? What will our vision be? How will we deal with our differences? And what might God's dream be for his Church, a foretaste and catalyst of the Kingdom of God: on earth as in heaven?

Well notice, then, what we glimpse in Acts 2, as we hear about those first followers of Jesus, living in Jerusalem, in the early days following his resurrection and Pentecost. For the picture of Christian community that emerges, as we read between the lines of Acts 2, is truly breathtaking, as we see God at work in remarkable, unique and instructive ways:

*'All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.'*

*& 'Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the good will of all the people.'*

And we have to remember that among these first Christian believers were the disciples and followers who had witnessed the ministry of Jesus – his mighty acts of teaching & healing & proclamation– but who had also witnessed, only a few weeks earlier, the devastation of Jesus being arrested, tortured and crucified: their hopes dashed, as he appeared to be defeated by earthly rulers, a seemingly tragic end to their hopes.

But here, as if miraculously, in Acts 2, we glimpse true resurrection and transformation at work, as those formerly cowering in fear are emboldened to proclaim their new-found faith, and individuals formerly isolated and socially distanced, come together to share food & worship, and to care for one another, in a uniquely generous and self-sacrificial ways.

What I love about the passage, however, is the sense we get not only that these Christians were worshipping & witnessing & sharing together, but that the shape of Christian community was qualitatively different... and in their daily lives, remarkable things were happening, which had not happened before. People were being healed of disease and sickness, goods were being shared, society transformed, a whole new future opening up: *'Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.'*

And we have to remember that salvation (the good news of Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit at work) was not understood solely as an inner state, a personal relationship with God – although this was at its heart - but something far wider, encompassing relationship with other, and 'salvation' at all levels of life: from the spiritual to the socio- economic and political. So life really was different, such that even Roman chroniclers like Josephus, commented that something was different about these Christians.

But if all this is what we imagine - that transforming quality of Christian community in Acts 2 - what happened next? what about church history? and what about us?

Now it would be very easy, at this point, to become downbeat, and to acknowledge that in Acts the early Church experiment rapidly degenerated into conflicts - between different groups and agendas - and that there has almost never been a time when the Church has lived up to that primitive Christian ideal of community.

Indeed this is how I often viewed the reality of living as a Christian, and what invariably happens to the good intentions of earnest Christian people; despite all the hard work, the pastoral care & the glimpses of good practise that find.

But then, my understanding shifted, in quite a profound way ... And what shifted in me, as I began to read the scriptures more deeply and to understand the practice of faith a little more, is this: I began to realise that it's not enough to have a simple picture of an ideal Christian community on one hand – and the messy reality we all live with, on the other hand, and secretly either to be in despair, or to be indifferent to the reality on the ground.

For, in reality what Christian community really means is acknowledging the reality that we're all different and at times have different agendas - real Christian community is never easy.

But what matters is learning the *tough love* of living together, of caring for one another and of dealing maturely with our disagreements. Allowing, in God's grace, and through genuine sharing and working together, the light of resurrection and transformation to emerge, if you like, from the bottom up... Allowing, as we dare to face each other with true dignity, healing, reconciliation & forgiveness to bubble up, as we open ourselves to receive the transforming grace of God...

As in any family, Christian love is not an unattainable ideal or easy-going niceness, where anything goes, but a tough bearing with one another in love, a keeping (where necessary) of clear boundaries, and a willingness to care for and to share with others, who may unlike us, which takes us out of our comfort zones.

As Paul puts it, in Colossians 3, another manifesto of what Christian community looks like: *'Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you.'*

And, again, in Romans, *'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.'* Following Christ the good shepherd; through whom we have a duty of care of one another.

And, what Acts reminds us, as we contemplate the tasks and the challenges that we all face, now **and** post-lockdown, is that we are not alone, but in Christ we are given all the resources we need, to help us live the good news we proclaim: For like the earliest Christians, we are strengthened by being rooted daily in *the apostles teaching and fellowship, united in the breaking of bread and prayers*.

So today, in our reading, we glimpse not just a community of devoted disciples, united in the worship of their risen Lord; we also meet a loving fellowship of real people – with feet of clay – people like you and me;

joining together, loving one another, sharing goods, and patiently discerning together, no doubt through trial and error, that kind of community that God, in Jesus Christ, calls them to become;

a community empowered by God to be different, and to fulfil all that God in Christ intends for our world;

a community transformed, as all belong, all find their voice, all contribute their own particular gifts, all look outwards in love & service, and all listen to Jesus' voice, following in his steps,

so that the world may become, even in our time, that which he longs for it to be; through the power of the resurrection.

And let me finish, as we reflect on that vision of Christian community that we seek to build here, and as we dream a dream for our future, post-lock-down, with this prayer:-

*Risen Christ, faithful shepherd of your Father's sheep: teach us to hear your voice and to follow your command, that all your people may be gathered into one flock, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.*