

Sunday 3rd May

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

READINGS

Acts 2.42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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 goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

1 Peter 2.19-25

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

John 10.1-10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own

sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

COLLECT

Almighty God,

whose Son Jesus Christ is the resurrection and the life:

raise us, who trust in him,

from the death of sin to the life of righteousness,

that we may seek those things which are above,

where he reigns with you

in the unity of the Holy Spirit,

one God, now and for ever.

Amen

(or)

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

SERMON

Mark Taylor

Acts 2: 42-47

All who believed were together and had all things in common

"We are all in this together" is an easy slogan used by tabloids and politicians at a time of national emergency. Is it true? Or more subtly, in what way does it describe or challenge the real situation in which we find ourselves?

Some of us living in a beautiful spring landscape who can still walk out into quiet lanes have a very different outlook from our fellow citizens banged up in high rise city flats. Those on protected incomes enjoy lifestyles that are unlike that of the newly unemployed or those struggling to stay in business. Those shielded are in awe of the heroic essential workers, especially clinical staff who serve people affected by Covid-19. Behaviour that remains selfish, hoarding for example, is shown up in sharp relief. There is a universal experience of shock, grief and loss, even if it is shared asymmetrically. In what sense can this complexity and difference describe us as "together"?

The Acts of the Apostles, Luke's second volume, is essential reading in the Easter season. Luke sees the life of the early church as a revelation of the Holy Spirit at work in the world, a world just as fragmented and violent as before, but assured of redemption. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the statement that the early Messianic sect, soon to be called Christians, were so convinced of the coming of God's kingdom that as an immediate response they had all things in common. So pressing was this response that when a little later Ananias and his wife Sapphira surreptitiously held back some of their possessions they were mortified (literally) when the dishonesty was uncovered! (Acts 5: 1-11)

The pooling of resources was all the more extraordinary when one realises that the early Christians were such a diverse group of people. Luke broadly speaks of the Hebrews and the Hellenists, but behind that generalisation we find that in Jerusalem were Jews from all of the Diaspora, think of Simon of Cyrene (Libya), or "God fearers" who were attracted to Judaism and took Synagogue instruction but were not fully committed, think of the eunuch converted by Philip, Acts 8, (Ethiopia/ Nubia). Jewish society was divided theologically too. Pharisees had a belief in resurrection, the Sadducees who held power in the Sanhedrin didn't. Add to all that the Greek and Roman influx of traders, army and executive. Luke paints a picture of this

extraordinary mix in Acts 2 when people hear the apostles speaking each in their own native language.

It is therefore all the more impressive that such a diverse body of people had such trust in the Lord and in each other that they could hold all things in common. Where did such trust and confidence come from? Luke is in no doubt. It was not simply a remarkable bit of social behaviour, but a response to the grace of God; the work of the Holy Spirit and the legacy from all that had happened in the life and death of Jesus.

Earlier in our preparation for Morning Prayer we hear, "The night has passed and the day lies open before us. Let us pray with one heart and mind". Followed by a deep silence. In that timeless moment our human business, its anxious plans, hopes and fears melt into the "one heart and mind". We are assured firstly that there is such a heart and mind! Then it dawns that the one heart and mind lies within and beyond, connecting and providing space, gently affirming and re-directing. The early Christians had that same experience in order to change their lives in the way they did. The one heart and mind that they responded to is the same that reaches out to us.

After the pandemic has resolved, in whatever way it will, there is a genuine sense that we cannot go back to behaviour as before. One could say that behaviour as before has led to this crisis which is itself a component and precursor for a much bigger one ahead, that of ecological collapse. After Covid-19 we will be a different people with different aspirations. We will need to understand at a deep level what it means to "believe together and have all things in common". That we might get to such a point requires us to pray with one heart and mind, and find that behind all the horror of the present age there is sufficient grace for all of us to be changed.

The day lies open before us. Let us pray with one heart and mind.

Mark Taylor (Reader)