

Acts 2.42–47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2.19–25; John 10.1–10

The first reading we heard this morning came from the beginning of the Book of Acts. It takes us back to Jerusalem in the months after Christ's resurrection and ascension, as the disciples begin to make sense of what happened, begin to understand the new age they are living in.

Just before this reading is the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples like tongues of fire, enabling them to speak in every human language. And now, filled with the Spirit, in the aftermath of this extraordinary experience, the disciples enter a radically new kind of community.

There is a lot packed into the description that we just heard. The disciples teach one another, they socialise, they break bread together, meaning probably both the sharing of ordinary meals and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. They do 'the prayers', this probably means going to the Temple as faithful Jews. And most famously, most remarkably, they give away everything that they have and share it out according to need.

The Spirit has unified the community and the author, Luke, wants us to understand that this unity takes place intellectually, socially, religiously and economically. He describes a deep, totalising kind of human contact, a complete mutual dependence.

I suspect many of us, as we read this, feel a kind of anxiety, perhaps even guilt. We notice the gulf between this community and our own. I find myself feeling reprimanded, as if I have failed by not following this example. In the darkness our hearts, perhaps we even feel resistance to this much contact, this risky dependence. The description is beautiful, of course it is, but it is also demanding, even terrifyingly so.

At this point, the preacher has two options. The first is to reassure, to recall that these were special circumstances, long ago, quite

impractical in our own time; that it is not explicit that this community is being presented to us as a template for our own; that it can be read metaphorically, as an image of spiritual giving and sharing.

But there is a famous saying that I have always liked: that the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted – and to afflict the comfortable. And so, although everything that I have just laid out is more-or-less true, let us try the second option first, not comfort but affliction; not to explain away this taxing example but to feel troubled by it.

Luke is showing us what a community looks like that is truly filled with the Holy Spirit, a community that knew Jesus, that was led by those chosen by him, a community committed to the most essential of Christian virtues, a community more than willing to die for its principles.

And this is not a strange or incongruous excerpt from some other, more important message. Quite the opposite: it is of keeping with an ethic that recurs throughout Luke's Gospel. The disciples leave behind their professions when he calls them; in the Magnificat, Mary proclaims that the rich will be sent empty away; the poor are blessed in the Beatitudes; Christ tells the rich young man to give away all his possessions if he wants to become his follower; the rich man in hell sees the beggar Lazarus in heaven. Christ, after all, was born in a barn, spent his childhood as a refugee, and lived as a wandering preacher. Christian monasticism is built on this example.

When he describes this community, Luke rushes through teaching, fellowship, breaking the bread and saying the prayers, but lingers over the details of an economics without property – this is the most remarkable, the hardest, the most disturbing part of the scene. How hard it was in first century Jerusalem; how hard it is in

21st century Vienna to give up our capital, to break with the economics of the world around us.

The challenge then and now is how vulnerable this makes us: how reliant upon the grace of God and the kindness of others we are without wealth, how exposed we are to the actions of our neighbours; how secure we are when our barns are filled with grain.

This is the voice of affliction, so what about comfort? The achievement of this first Christian community is remarkable, and, right now, perhaps impossible. But I have three suggestions for what we can do, even if are not going to live like this – yet.

The first is not to reduce the critique but to enlarge it. Critique is part of the work of a Christian and it is work that we must carry out not only on our own finances but on those of our nation, businesses, organisations too. Mary, Christ and Luke spoke not only to individuals but to societies. The in church in Jerusalem that shared all their property had 3,000 members. Their calling, like ours, was social and political, and we need to identify the failure of our national economics to be generous, equal and humane.

The second suggestion I have is to be inspired rather than threatened by the weight of this difference. We do not live like this first church, but nor did Luke's earliest readers. He described this scene knowing it was already unfamiliar and challenging. But the point of this was not to feel defensive about our failure. We have preserved Luke's text for two millennia because we believe that it should remain our north star. It must guide us not despite the fact that we fall short but because of it.

The scene in Jerusalem is not, in fact, unknown to us – all of us teach or learn at church, give or receive fellowship, share meals and share the Eucharist, give of our property. The Holy Spirit breathes through our lives here. This stewardship season, the

emphasis at Christ Church is on time and talent – what can we give of our time and our skills to the church, what can we volunteer for, what can we contribute to. Can we turn up a bit earlier for the AV team or stay late to clear up the coffee, come midweek to Prayer Ministry or choir or midweek Holy Communion, organise an event for the Young Adults or Kids Church, give a talk at Soundings? These are exactly the fellowship, teaching and bread breaking activities of the community in Jerusalem.

As we think about what we can offer of our time and our skills, we need to remember that the first disciples did not form their community because they were just natural good people, or felt obligated, or heard sermons. They did this because of the Holy Spirit, because they were filled with God himself: their economics flowed from the transformation of Pentecost; it was part of the new age of the risen Christ.

Luke tells his story in this way deliberately, the transformation of Pentecost comes first, and then the transformed community comes next. The economics of the first disciples is an analogy for the way the Holy Spirit had joined the disciples together. This was a grand undoing of the splintering that took place when the tower of Babel was destroyed at the beginning of the Old Testament and humanity was divided by its countless languages. Being re-joined by the Spirit entailed being rejoined linguistically, and, as we have heard, socially, intellectually, prayerfully – and economically.

I said that I had three suggestions: the first was critique; the second was inspiration; the third is prayer. Let us pray this stewardship season that we may be transformed by the example of that first church in Jerusalem, two thousand years ago.

Amen.