

7th April 2024

Acts 4.32-35 N.T. p.104

John 20.19-31 N.T. p99



The Community of the Resurrection

Sometimes people open up to you whilst driving. I suppose if you are their passenger, you are something of a captive audience. Well, I was once in a car with a church secretary many years ago in another place, and he happened to make an observation that has stayed with me ever since. He said the thing people never discuss in any church is their *disposable income*.

To be truthful I didn't really know how to respond, and I'm not sure that even if I wanted to, that I knew mine off the top of my head. It didn't matter anyway, because he never told me his, but quickly moved on to asking if I thought the meeting we were driving to would be long or short! That was the really important thing!!

In today's reading from Acts we are told of an early church community in which the members were not only open about their incomes but also seemed to share them. Was this an early form of communism, was it an exception or a mistake even? In many ways it's a passage that raises as many questions as it answers.

Indeed, money does have a bad press in church sometimes, or at least as my church secretary friend pointed out, we don't like talking about it. Yet, we all know it has the force to do so much good. Perhaps my driver that night was conscious that Jesus often seemed to talk about money, indeed that of his 39 parables, 11 of them are on that very subject.

Of course, in Jesus' day there was no state welfare system as we would know it today. The *family* was the closest equivalent with it becoming an expectation that a major responsibility of children was to look after their parents in old age. The extended family was, in effect, the social security net of that first century world.

And whenever Jesus spoke of *The Poor* it was an all-encompassing term that not only included those who dropped below the subsistence level, but also the sick, who sometimes quite literally lived on the margins of their village. To cry *Blessed are the Poor* was to pray for people crushed by financial, medical, or even political

inequalities. Jesus' view of the breaking in of God's Kingdom was a longing for justice and dignity for everyone. Jesus stood by the poor; indeed, some would argue that in terms of his emphasis and focus he was in a sense even *biased towards the poor*.

Now it's sometimes the bible's throw away lines that are the most intriguing and Luke has one in the eighth chapter of his gospel as he describes three of Jesus' followers. They are not in any of the various prestigious lists of his male disciples but are somewhat of an appendix to the narrative, all be it a vital one. Luke names three women, but hints there might well have been others, who collectively form the patrons of Jesus. It is, Luke says, these women who did much to bankroll his three years of itinerant ministry. They are Mary Magdalene, Joanna (whose name literally means *God is generous*) a lady who was married to Herod's steward, and Susanna. From their own means these enigmatic and barely recognised key players enabled Jesus to operate.

I think we should appreciate these brief three verses in Luke 8 a little more than we do. They are surely very useful to any church treasurer giving an annual report. They remind us that service to God comes in many forms and Mary, Joanna and Susanna showed great service to Jesus through their financial generosity. We should more readily acknowledge the pivotal and fundamental place they occupied in the mission strategy of Jesus of Nazareth.

So, there was an atmosphere of generosity and commitment around Jesus in his pre-resurrection days. Discipleship could be expressed either by staying in your village and living out his message there, or for some it was more radical, they literally left everything and followed Jesus and maybe that's a discipleship its hard for us to get our minds around because it was so total.

The call of Jesus must have been very strong and alluring for some. Maybe it was those wonderful stories that drew people. Or perhaps his unambiguous standing alongside the poor. His message had momentum and magnetism.

In a sense Jesus stands in that prophetic tradition from Judaism that so often gave people hope in dark times. Prophets gave the people permission to dream of change and re-imagine how life could be. Prophets kept the dreaming and the hoping alive.

Jesus is part of that prophetic tradition. So, when he spoke to the *poor*, he painted a picture of the Kingdom of God in terms of a Great Feast to which all were invited, a banqueting table when the first shall be last and the last served first. Jesus spoke of life in all its fullness, an overflowing table of generous hospitality at which all were welcomed.

Now, the challenge was this. Once Jesus was gone, post crucifixion, would the dreaming and hoping die with him? Would those disciples who had left everything now slink off back to home hoping their family and jobs would still be waiting for them? Would Mary, Joanna and Susanna have fuller bank balances every month because their financial support was simply no longer required?

For that is, surely, what the authorities hoped. That the dream had died with Jesus and talk of this Kingdom of God had hit the buffers on that first Good Friday. Then this would no longer be a movement but just a blip of history, a three-year campaign that failed.

And that's why we have today's reading, on the Sunday after Easter, from Acts 4. A description of a community of early Christians who appear to be united and sincere, who held a common purse so they could care for the poor and needy. A community who had big hearted members like Barnabus, nick named the Son of Encouragement.

Now the Acts of the Apostles isn't a fudge, it will not claim in future pages that such unity was either easy or consistent in the early Church, but it does make this claim in chapter 4, that this united community being described here, this outward looking, generous hearted community being described here, was in some way bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the lively, pulsating message of the fifth book of the New Testament, that contrary to all the hopes of Jesus' enemies that his message, his life and his love would die with him – because communities like this one described in chapter four were uniting in kindness and striving to live with compassion, the story of Jesus was still, post resurrection, very much alive and kicking.

That's how you bear witness to the resurrection. Resurrection means we still dare to dream. Resurrection means a man like Barnabus becomes a change maker and uses his money to bring hope. Resurrection means we keep telling

the stories of Jesus. And in all of this God breathes his life into ours and makes our lives complete. The life of Jesus lives on in the dreams and actions of those who seek to follow him and live with his kindness.

Well, this is the 2nd Sunday of Easter and we're still singing alleluia. And for over two thousand years succeeding generations of Christians have sought, in the words of Acts 4, to bear witness to the resurrection. Our hope and prayer is that we might be people whose thinking and living is somehow infused with the life of Jesus and the hope of God.

So I want to say to all our elders this morning, and I hope this isn't too shocking a thing to mention; in a moment you will not be commissioned simply to sit on a committee or fill a slot on a rota – now I know you'll do those things (I hope with a smile on your face) – but in all you do and are as elders, you are, in a sense commissioned, to be a witness to the resurrection. So that as we work through our agendas, look after our building, organise our finances and seek to care for the congregation, we want to be dreamers and change makers, we want the resurrection life of Jesus to pulsate in the life of this local church.

It's part of what we do through our Partnership in Mission offerings. In our giving we pray that the wonderful organisations we support will make a positive difference, transformative change inspired by the resurrection hope of Jesus.

There is an Anglican monastery and theological college in Yorkshire with a wonderful name. It's called *The Community of the Resurrection*. Desmond Tutu trained there and loved returning there throughout his life.

Isn't it a great name, it would be a wonderful name for any Christian institution. It's what's happening in Acts 4, as kindness is shown and compassion shared, these first century Christians were living as a Community of the Resurrection.

And that is our calling too.

May it be so, in the name of our risen Lord.
Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 3rd April 2024