

Growing Great Community 2

Richard Dawson – November 6

John 15¹²⁻¹⁷ / Matt 28¹⁶⁻²⁰ / Psalm 33

One of the most important things to realize about new generations is that they look for belonging before they look to believe. In other words, they ask questions about whether they feel included before they consider questions of belief or even values. If they feel they belong then they will be open to the philosophies espoused by the group who has made them feel included. They do not approach group membership asking first the question ‘What do you believe?’

The same could be said of the early Church despite its huge effort to define and preserve an orthodox faith it could not use this to expand its influence in the first 400 years because public preaching and, indeed, proselytizing was largely outlawed or at least considered anti-social. According to Rodney Stark, Church Historian and Sociologist, the Early Church made its greatest impression on the surrounding pagan society by virtue of the nature of its community, the strength of belonging it imparted to its members. We, today, are faced with exactly the same challenge. If we don’t strengthen the community of the Church we face alienating new generations and providing something entirely inadequate within which to disciple them. One whole half of the Jesus’ vision of the Church is not being well attended to in the West today and we must find a corrective for that.

The Church is left, upon the ascension of Jesus, with not one but two major themes for its future life. The first we call the Great Commission. This is the injunction in Matthew’s Gospel to ‘Go therefore and make disciples...’ This is perhaps the best known aspect of Jesus’ commissioning of the Church and it calls us always to tell the story of Christ’s redemption and the availability of peace with God and forgiveness for sin through the work of Christ. It is quite simply the task of sharing Christ with all who would listen.

The logic behind this is explained elsewhere in the Gospels.

¹⁴But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? ¹⁵And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10)

In order to believe people need to hear. How will they hear unless someone tells them – someone who knows the truth? Orthodox Christians for thousands of years have understood that this is a fundamental task of the Church – to tell others. But there is second fundamental plank in the vision Jesus leaves His disciples of the Church and this is known not as the Great Commission but as the Great Commandment...

‘Love one another as I have loved You. **By this** will all men know you are my disciples.’

Far less importance has been attached to this side of the vision, I believe. Far less weight has been attached to this further commission of the Church and consequently, like a ship whose anchor has broken away the Church the great ship of the Church floats happily but drifts dangerously on the open sea. You see the Church was never meant simply to be a container for those who by dint of our obedience to the Great Commission made it to the safe shores of salvation. It was never meant to be simply the result of the Great Commission. Rather, it was meant to be a significant partner in the evangelistic task not by virtue of its talk **but by virtue of its very life**. This is the other side of the active work of sharing the Gospel, that is, it must be backed up by an even more active witness to the success of the Gospel in the lives of Christians and that success is measured largely in terms of **the health of the community which is the Church**.

I use the word ‘community’ deliberately here because it is in and through community that the relationships, which Jesus said should be characterized by love, exist. It is here, I believe, at the heart of the Church, where we are weakest today. We work hard to bring people to faith. We share the Gospel, we open our lives to others and we see some come to faith but how often do we see that faith

soured and then ruined by relationships within the Church which are not even worthy of unbelievers. Churches in which a stranger is kept a stranger even after the 5th or 6th visit, Churches where finding a friend is harder than making an enemy; Churches where unseen and unspoken standards are raised against the young, the fallen and the lost before any kind of support is offered; Churches where members do little to really get to know one another. Against this kind of backdrop we bring our hard won converts and we wonder why they do not stay and why the Church is not prospering.

In short without the Great Commandment to compliment the great commission we will find ourselves working incredibly hard for little return and what's worse we ourselves will not continue to grow as Christians and as people.

What are the marks of such a community? What characteristics are display this Christ-centredness? Here I am not thinking in terms of the traditional marks which are that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. Rather I am asking about how these things might manifest practically. I think as we look at the early Church two things become clear in this regard. The first is that the community did away with all kinds of class prejudice. The value of a person was not to be determined by virtue of your birth, your wealth, your age or your gender or, indeed, anything. All people were loved equally by God; all were included in Christ's work on the Cross; all were to be valued equally under God and this was to be reflected in how the Christian community lived.

This had a remarkable effect on how women were viewed and treated. In Roman culture up till that time women were little more than chattels. The practice of female infanticide, the killing of female babies, was rife with old drains in Rome revealing literally hundreds of infant female skeletons when they are dug up. So bad was it that Rome's armies began to dwindle in the 4th and 5th centuries because there were not enough women left to have more babies. The Christian community outlawed this immediately. Women were quickly recognized as having legitimate spiritual and leadership gifts and were, in general, given positions based on these gifts. One would have to say that a later age did not honour this and there was considerable regression from this early stand but the fact remains that this is how it was for us in the beginning.

Today I suspect our prejudices are much better disguised. How many of us have friends who are not people of similar talent and/or pay rate as ours? How many of us fellowship with people who are mentally ill or handicapped in some way? How many of us visit the elderly regularly or regularly take interest in someone much younger than ourselves excepting, of course, our own children? This may not seem terribly significant but a sociologist would have a field day in our church analyzing the stratification of our church in these areas I suspect. In short we become stuck fellowshipping only with people who will do our self-esteem and image some good. Anyone else we exclude. We need to confront these issues and pray about them and ask God to help us become more Christ-centred in this area. More than this, however, we need to realise that a corollary of the central value in the Church is the ability to relate well to others – to be worth relating to – to learn to make the effort with others.

Let me make a couple of comments here. One of the foremost challenges in the Christian Church today is that of learning the art not just of relating well but of relating as a friend – of relating in a manner that conveys the primary value of love. Jesus said to His disciples before he left,

¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15)

Now of course we have to modify this depending on the nature of the context we're in. Parents must still be parents, people in authority must rightly use that authority but so many of us struggle in the area of friendship and the Church seems to me to be a place where friendships should be strong and yet, for some reason, it isn't. I want to suggest to you this morning two reasons why and ask us to ponder on these. The first is simply time. If we want to be a friend we simply must devote time to a relationship. Relationships inevitably get shallower the less time is put into them. The second is simply a lack of skill. We assume that being a friend is something that should come naturally. I think not. I think we need to be taught how to be a friend and what friendship really entails. And it's only in community that such skills are honed...

Pachomius was an Egyptian soldier won to Christ by the kindness of Christians in Thebes. After his release from the military around A.D. 315, he was baptized. Serious about his new faith and determined to grow, Pachomius became a disciple of Palamon, an ascetic who taught him the self-denial and solitary life of a religious hermit.

In early Christianity, the model of devotion was the recluse dedicated to resisting the corruption of society. These hermits wandered the desert alone—fasting, praying, and having visions. Many went to extremes: eating nothing but grass, living in trees, or refusing to wash.

Such was the popular image of holiness: solitude, silence, and severity. And such was Pachomius's early spiritual training. But he began to question the methods and lifestyle of his mentors.

How can you learn to love if no one else is around? How can you learn humility living alone? How can you learn kindness or gentleness or goodness in isolation? How can you learn patience unless someone puts yours to the test? In short, he concluded, developing spiritual fruit requires being around people—ordinary, ordinary people. "To save souls," he said, "you must bring them together."

Spiritual muscle isn't even learned among friends we have chosen. God's kind of love is best learned where we can't be selective about our associates. Perhaps this is why the two institutions established by God—the family and the church—are not joined by invitation only. We have no choice about who our parents or brothers or sisters will be; yet we are expected to love them. Neither can we choose who will or will not be in the family of God; any who confess Jesus as Lord must be welcomed. We learn *agape* love most effectively in our involuntary associations, away from the temptation of choosing to love only the attractive.

So Pachomius began an ascetic *koinonia*, where holiness was developed not in isolation but in community. Instead of each person seeking God in his own way, with the dangers of idleness and eccentricity, Pachomius established a common life based on worship, work, and discipline.

In community with flawed, demanding, sometimes disagreeable people, followers of Pachomius learned to take hurt rather than give it. They discovered that disagreements and opposition provide the opportunity to redeem life situations and experience God's grace. Thus began genuine monastic life.

Pachomius, realized the importance of honing our faith within a community; of living out one's faith in this context and of deliberately working to build community **so that** faith could find a real context within which to grow. But we, in this age, have settled for a mere shadow of community, one in which we can largely pick and choose who we wish to fellowship and one in which a weekly meeting takes the place of the choice which make community so vital.

A second major mark of the Church was its handling of resources.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2)

There was an uncomplicated offering of resource to the church to distribute to those who had need. There was a determination that people should be helped who were poor or struggling to make ends meet and particularly people who are gravely disadvantaged by their situation in life such as orphans or widows. Moreover there was a determination that our resources were to be shared. This is something I suspect we've fallen away from, largely, perhaps, in response to the welfare state but it is something that made a huge impression on the surrounding pagan population. This kind of sharing was largely unheard of. People didn't share their wealth with others easily. It was a dog eat dog world. By doing this, however, the Church, in many Roman cities, was able to help its people to thrive and to survive the vagaries of 1st century city life. They were able to live with

dignity as a result of the faith which was being lived out in their great communities.

Wouldn't it be great to make this work again? Wouldn't it be great to make people jealous of our community; of our love for each other and of our practical methods for helping each other thrive in this society?

I believe the day has come where the greatest evangelical tool at our disposal is how we live together. We have a long way to go to replicate something of the deep fellowship of that first Church but I think we can certainly head there. Won't you join us to see where God might lead us; to see how God will teach us to love one another as He has loved us and to create a practical loving community. I pray you will.

AMEN.