

Living in Community 1

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Acts 2⁴³⁻⁴⁷ / 2 Peter 3¹⁻¹⁰ / Matt 18²³⁻³⁵ /

After a morning service, a father observed his young son in the back of the sanctuary looking at a plaque on the wall. When the father joined him, the young boy asked what the plaque was for. The father replied, "Son, that was put up in the memory of all those who have died in the service." Turning to his father, he asked, "Which one, morning or evening?"

What's your vision of Church? Is it as jaundiced and dead as is reflected in this joke or have you a much grander vision of what Church is and can achieve? And if you have a vision is that vision something which squares with the biblical vision of the Church? Is it along the lines of what God envisages for His Church? I want to ask that question this morning as we continue to look at the nature of the Church following its birth at Pentecost.

As soon as the Spirit comes on those first believers in Jerusalem and God grows the Church miraculously in that hour the attention in Acts turns towards this very subject - the nature of the new Church. What is it to be Church? What is it to belong to Church? What is it to relate as Church to the rest of society – especially a rather bemused and hostile society? These questions occupy much of the rest of Acts and, indeed, one might argue, the rest of the New Testament. What is this new think called Church like? What does it do, how does it work?

If we look quickly at the first passage in Acts which attempts to describe the Church we find these facets. The Church community lived with a palpable sense of God's Presence which created an awe amongst them. This was a result of the many miracles and signs being done by the Apostles. In other words the witness of the Apostles was backed up by works of power.

Communal life became the norm. Instead of competing with each other to obtain wealth and possessions they gave away this in order that they might **be together**. They do not horde their possessions but allow the community to use them as it has need. Furthermore, the community does not horde its possessions but gives to those who are in need. This is an interesting phenomenon since it is clear they still had homes but these homes it seems became much more open to the community.

Worship becomes a distinguishing feature of the community. They gathered for worship in the Temple and in their homes and, as the scripture says, they spent much time together engaged in these activities. And this was reflected in their spirits. It says they had 'glad and generous hearts.' They were happy in this. They were joyful in this.

And the result? The result is quite obvious. The writer of Acts makes it abundantly plain when he says, '**And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**' The result is

quite simply a massive expansion of the Church – of those who want to relate to and be a part of God's community in Creation. No particular programmes here, no great push into the community, simply the Church being the Church.

But let's not minimise what was happening here as if what the disciples were doing was simple or came without a cost. The cost is significant and only a chapter away we find Peter and John dragged before the Jewish Council to explain their actions. The Council eventually let them go but this becomes just the beginning of a campaign of terror launched against the fledgling Church by both the Jews and the Roman authorities. And there is a cost to living in community like this. One lives in radical difference to and, in one sense at least, isolation from, the general community. And one must be prepared to sacrifice some of the values of our dominant culture – commitment to individual wealth and to individual gain; Commitment to a life of worship or at least a life where worship becomes a real focal point; A determination to become generous, to give not to a pre-determined formula but in response to God's gift to us. These things require commitment and involve cost but, this, friends, is what the Church in Acts looked like. And I dare say that wherever the Church has flourished in all the centuries since, wherever it has undergone a revival it has been in conjunction with a rediscovery of these same basic principles of life lived communally, generously and in worship. Of course there may be some other fundamentals to be added here. Nothing is said about our role in caring for the ecology of the world or perhaps our direct relationship with the secular community, with politics and with power and the church needs to consider these issues today but I think the ones I've mentioned formed the basis for a further development here.

But what is the goal of all this special life of the Church? Why should we live this way? Is it just to expand the borders of the Church – to make the Church grow so that it becomes all things to all people? Is this what scripture indicates? **Is the Church really just a fore-runner of what all communities should look like?**

This is a problematic question for two reasons at least:

1. The Church is not complete and won't be until Christ comes again – the New Testament tells us that we are and will be an incomplete community until our Lord comes again. If this is the case we cannot assume that we have a final revelation of the true nature of the Church and we can assume, I think, that God still has some new things for us as the Church to take on and to get involved with. If this is the case then when we look at the Church here and now we see something incomplete and so we can't assume that this model is entirely representative of community.
2. The NT is convinced that God has made a place, a legitimate and God protected place for those who are not in the Church. This place has many names. Sometimes it is called, 'The World' sometimes it is simply represented as those who are not in the Church. This may not be the **best** place but it is still a place of shelter and it is a place that God clearly loves. This is the place of the **secular** – which means 'of or pertaining to worldly things or to things that are not regarded as religious, spiritual, or sacred'

We've tended to interpret this word rather negatively as a place of God's judgement but, in fact, that is not, I believe, a biblical stance. How can we know this? In the first place we

know for sure that God loves this place since perhaps the most well known verse in the NT tells us that “**God so loved the world...**” Secondly, if we look at our reading from the Gospel today we discover that a further significant feature of God’s approach towards those who are **debtors** in His kingdom is **patience**. Indeed, He is very **unhappy** with those who will not reflect that patience in dealing with those who owe them something. God is patient and He expects us to reflect that patience in our dealing with all people especially those who are debtors. Furthermore, God is patient with the unbeliever and this patience is reflected in the time He gives and in the **space** He gives to all people to comprehend the truth of His love and grace. God does not want any person to perish and so He gives us time and space to learn the lesson of His love. And that time is represented concretely in what we call the **secular** world – the temporal world – the world which does not comprehend God as He has given Himself to be comprehended in Jesus Christ. And this is **not** a cursed place but is, indeed, a place of God’s blessing and Presence. Thirdly, this is the place Christ went to first in His missionary travels because, as He said, it was the sick who needed a doctor. God sent His doctor, and still does, to the **secular world**.

Now if God is in the secular world this tells us something about the Church. It tells us that the Church may give itself permission to learn from the secular world – even to meet God in the secular world. It means that we can, with wisdom and prayer, even **model** the secular world to a certain extent, taking lessons learned there into the Church and into our lives. Christ makes this abundantly clear in another passage from the New Testament when he comments on the wisdom of those who choose to live in the world as opposed to those who are faithful. Listen to this...

⁸“The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. (Luke 16)

Why was the dishonest servant commended? Because he’d acted shrewdly. He’d assured his future by dealing with his own kind in a manner they understood and would respond to. Note that it is the **master** who commends his own dishonest servant. The **master** discovers what he has done. Why then does he not punish the servant? Because he recognises a man who understands what it takes to survive in this harsh world. Does this mean we too should be dishonest? No. This parable isn’t intended to glorify dishonesty but it does tell us that there is a wisdom and an intelligence which while it may not perceive God certainly perceives and understands people and we can learn from it. The Church can learn from the world. Perhaps not about God though that may yet be the case. **Certainly about the world**. More to the point we can discover God in the world. God is closer, often, to a desperate and lost world than to a calculating and disingenuous faith – that is why Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees and Sadducees that Tax Collectors and Prostitutes were entering the Kingdom of Heaven ahead of them.

Now you may find this rather difficult and I don’t blame you. Please don’t burn me at the stake today. Suffice to say at this point that the Church must view itself as being **on a journey – not yet perfect – with more to learn** and if this is the case then our goals need to be somewhat more

general than specific. So in answer to the question, what are we aiming at here is my first answer in story form...

On a certain isolated island, when a young man proposed marriage, it was customary to announce it to the entire village. Then he and the whole community would go to the young woman's home. Her father would come outside and then – in front of the community – the father and suitor would barter. Obviously, they didn't view themselves as doing anything chauvinistic, even though we might view it that way somewhat. The main item of value on this island was the cow. Therefore, the suitor would offer the father a certain number of cows for his daughter. The average bride was worth two cows, perhaps three if she was unusually bright or attractive. The all-time record was four cows. The most eligible bachelor on the island was Johnny Lingo. He was handsome and wealthy. Imagine all of the excitement among the women of the island when Johnny announced one day that he had selected a wife. But then he shocked everyone by announcing that his choice was a girl named Lisa. Lisa was not even in the top ten. She was regarded as rather plain and frightfully shy. Some of the jokers in the crowd even suggested that Lisa's father might pay Johnny a cow or two. The community gathered at Lisa's house for the bartering. Then came an even greater shock. Johnny's opening bid for Lisa was eight cows. Her father almost fainted, but he managed to say yes. That very evening Johnny and Lisa were married. They departed for their home on an adjacent island. For a full year no one saw Johnny or Lisa. Then on their first anniversary they returned to visit their parents. From the moment they arrived at the dock, the grapevine went ballistic with gossip. Everybody said, "Come and see Johnny and Lisa. You won't believe it!" Everybody came, but nobody noticed Johnny. All eyes were on Lisa. She had been transformed. She was a vision of loveliness. She was poised, warm, friendly, and confident and incredibly beautiful. At the end of the day as Johnny and Lisa were preparing to return to their home, one of Johnny's long-time friends pulled him aside and said, "I want to know the secret of this amazing transformation in Lisa. How did it happen?" Johnny said, "I will tell you. From the time Lisa was born, she had been treated as though she was not worth very much. She had begun to believe that about herself. But I announced to the community that she was an 8-cow wife, and I have treated her just that way. She has become that vision of herself that she sees every day in my eyes."

The Church is first and foremost a place of transformation – a place where we can discover God's vision for our lives and begin to live it out. And it is transforming because God's love is present in the Church. Jesus said, "Where two or more are gathered in my Name, there I am also." Jesus is present where we meet in His Name. And where He is Present, His vision of our lives is to the fore because He loves us. This is the key to the transforming nature of the Church. When I look at you not so much through my own eyes but through the eyes of God's love, you will begin to know the transforming power of God just as Johnny Lingo's bride became what his love saw in her. And let me add here that this may even mean beginning to love ourselves first!

I want you to listen to this next song, a song that many of you will know well. But this time I want you to imagine that God is singing it **to you!** This is what God wants to say to each one of us.