

4th Sunday of Easter 2023 – Brian Griffiths

Holy Habits in the Early Church

Acts 2: 42-47

It's no secret that the last year has been pretty tough for Rowena and myself. Rowena is still recovering from her heart attack. She has had two operations last month in the space of ten days to fit a pacemaker – the second to reposition one of the pacing wires – and we have been told that it is going to be some months before she feels well again. I have just started a second round of treatment at The Royal Marsden, but, thankfully, so far, this latest different type of therapy has had less side effects than the first. For both of us our faith has been really badly shaken and made little sense – which is why I suggested to the Ministry Team that we looked at the dilemma of unanswered prayer during Lent. There was a time not so long ago when I could have simply packed it in and resigned as a Reader.

However, the main thing that has kept us going here is the kindness that many people in the congregations here, and from our previous parish of St Mark in South Norwood, have shown to us. Without really having to ask, people have volunteered to take us to hospital appointments which has been a fantastic help. Sometimes that meant two trips – once to drop me off and then back again to pick me up three hours later after therapy. People have constantly asked how we are getting on and assured us of their prayers – sometimes the phone has rung off the hook! We have lost count of the number of lovely texts, WhatsApp messages, cards and E cards we have received. People have spent time with me just chatting in a coffee shop – which has been a real joy. Best of all, people have cooked for us which has helped our son, Rhys, enormously as he has prepared the bulk of the meals for us. People here have cooked shepherd's pies (very relevant to our gospel reading today!), lasagne, macaroni and cheese, beef casserole, many, many cakes – the list goes on (and so does my weight – as the hospital keep reminding me!)

We have felt surrounded by love and care. There has been a very real sense of genuine community enveloping us. If we look at our New Testament reading today from Acts Chapter 2, there are similar strong bonds of fellowship and love happening in that first church in Jerusalem. The first Christians had been completely energised by the fact that Jesus had risen and they formed this tight knit community where everyone genuinely loved each other. We heard these words:

'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 generous¹ 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.'

Twice in that reading we heard the word 'together.'

'All who believed were together'

'They spent much time together in the Temple'

The Greek word that Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, uses to describe this fellowship and togetherness is Koinonia. This word is used over 20 times in the bible and this is the first occurrence of it. It means ***"fellowship, sharing in common, communion. It is being in agreement with one another, being united in purpose, and serving alongside each other.*** This 'togetherness' was a massive hallmark of the first believers. They were truly one community – everyone caring deeply about the others – and the whole community modelled around the lifestyle and teaching of Jesus.

Those first Christians really looked out for each other. They loved each other deeply and this was clearly evident to those looking from the outside in. Here was something that people had not seen before. What was firing these people up – what was their inspiration?

Everything they had they shared. There was a very real sense of justice for all – all were equal – no one was left out. This was a very inclusive community. There was a sharing of ministry. This word koinonia is used every time Paul or one of the other apostles writes about attitudes amongst the early Christians:

Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality (Romans)

Now the one who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with the one who teaches it (Galatians)

Sadly, I had to pull out of teaching on the Bishop's Certificate Course this year – I would have started a few Tuesdays ago in Southwark. I am really disappointed about this as I would have been tutoring on the module entitled

'21st Century Christianity'. This whole section of the course is based around our reading from Acts Chapter 2. It looks at the characteristics of that church seeking to work out how we can apply those to our church communities today. The sense of community – of 'koinonia' is as vital to the success of the church today as it was back then.

So, this first church was shot through with spirit filled preaching, deep fellowship and sharing, devotion to breaking bread together and joyful, thankful prayer. For me, what really attracted new disciples was this togetherness. People saw something new and something pretty radical. This was a completely different lifestyle – those outside the church were keen to be part of it. It's the same togetherness that Rowena and I have experienced from so many here and I am sure that others have experienced that too.

We are fortunate in St Francis' and St Mary's that we have achieved a lot in outreach to those who do not worship with us in West Wickham. This is really encouraging. However, we must never forget that caring for each other is equally, if not more, important than caring for our immediate community. It is our love for one another that marks us out as followers of Jesus.

You may think that Acts 2: 42-47 is the image of the perfect church. In some ways it is. Some have commented that this model of church is idealistic and not really achievable today. However, what we see here is a church in its infancy – in its honeymoon period. As the church grew and matured things changed. Soon the church met together on the first day of the week and had a collection for the poor and needy. The common sharing of all possessions was less of a feature. Worship happened once a week too. There were controversies and Paul has to write to some of the churches he had set up on his missions to correct their teaching and admonish those who strayed from the gospel message.

Of course, we know that their faith was going to be severely tested as the church lost its popularity and came to be persecuted. In fact, although that Acts church was extremely attractive to many, it seriously annoyed the religious leaders of the day. Peter and John were arrested for preaching the message of Christ. The early church began to be persecuted.

But the main characteristics of the church were there - the devotion to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer and this wonderful togetherness – this koinonia. I wonder how we at St Francis and St Mary's measure up to those criteria? How important is teaching in our parishes? How many who come Sunday by Sunday engage with study groups? Do we really engage in active listening with the preacher in the Sunday sermon (by the way,

that's why my sermons won't appear in the email pew sheets – they'll appear after the services)? How deep is our fellowship (I think that's one of the great strengths here)? How far could we go in sharing with others? How generous are we? How important is the communion in our worship? How welcoming and inclusive are we to newcomers? How do we get on with other Christians in other churches around us? What role does prayer play in our individual lives and in our corporate life together as the church in West Wickham? Are we as devoted to prayer as that first church – is it part of our daily discipline?

These are hard questions, but if we are to be a vibrant, spirit filled church like the one in Acts Chapter 2 then we need to respond to them and act on them. There is no such thing as 'the perfect church', but we can use the church in Acts 2 as our model to grow closer to the people that Jesus wants us to be. We have a strong foundation to build on and, so, let us thank God for all the wonderful kindness and love that we share amongst each other in St Mary's and St Francis'

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