

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

for Easter 4 (3 May)

Acts 2:42-47

"The events recorded here are a diet of enthusiasm and encouragement, offered to Christians living in bleaker and more humdrum times" – so says a commentary I read concerning the place of today's extract from Acts. These words – this short passage of six verses – are considered to be just what the reader of Acts was looking for, in terms of motivation, in those early formative days – how apt they are in our not-so-better times. With the virus practising its world-domination tactics, and with the rest of us falling under its spell, the sentiment quoted above could most definitely include us. We do indeed need a diet of enthusiasm and encouragement at this time if we are to survive the monotony and threat of our present world.

The scriptures try to share with us how life was transformed for those first-century believers of the 'New Way' (as Christianity was originally known), but they cannot really portray the beating heart of it all. The words and images we have are dependent upon fragments of literature, inherited oral traditions, biblical interpretation, and sheer guesswork. It is our own energy of faith that converts these rather dry and dusty morsels into the enthusiasm that then encourages our imaginations to blossom into vibrant spiritual life. Our faith is not served on a plate or boxed neatly with ribbon – it is a seed planted, an idea formed, an image drawn, and a reaction personified. It is with enthusiasm and encouragement that we become the people of faith that we are.

And we are, of course, grateful to the characters of Acts, because without their initial vitality, this so-called 'New Way' might have floundered. It certainly had an uphill struggle, given that it was born out of presumed anarchy; the execution of a troublesome itinerant preacher-man should have put a stop to it, but matters did not go quite according to the plans of humans ... instead, they went in the way of God; and what Acts reveals to us are lots of wonderful images of both enthusiasm and encouragement, images that hopefully will keep us focussed as we plough our way through the mire that is "Corona".

Looking once again at today's extract, you could almost view it as a 'tick-box' list ... one of those tedious forms that is forever asking inane questions (one of the daftest of such is the USA Immigration form, but that is another story for another day!), except that this list here in Acts thankfully defies the word 'tedious'. Far from it, this list is bursting with the enthusiasm of what it is like to be part of this 'new gang', and it fills the reader with all the encouragement they need to join in and sign up. At least, we hope it does. It shapes and forms the tasks, the invited structure, the component parts. It portrays a way of being that implies God is never far away. It says to us all, "Welcome!"

And this was no mere club to join, or society to be part of, or hobby to engage with – this was to be an experience that would transform the very essence of life. This 'New Way' was to offer exactly that: a new direction, new practices, new thinking. This Way was to bring new paths to tread, new rules to formulate, new hopes to cling onto – elements we could well be focussing upon in what the

commentator says are, "bleaker and more humdrum times." And this Way was to lead the individual ever closer to their God, to the richness of being part of His world, and to be open to His power. As we battle an ever-invading foreign body, we most certainly need a combative power to hopefully override it. Maybe our faith will provide us with that? Maybe we will succeed? The inner strength granted to us by our faith – that same strength that was no doubt present in the lives of Acts – this strength will hopefully sustain us as we attempt to move forward.

Certainly, Acts provides a 'blue-print' of-sorts. It hints at the attitude we should be adopting as people of faith, the practices we should be adhering to, the ideals that we should be subscribing to. It wraps everything in the relationship we should be forming between us and God, between us and each other, between us and ourselves. The evolution of faith requires an attitude. It is not a product, you cannot just buy it and stick it at the back of a drawer. Faith needs to live and breathe – it needs to be virus-like, but in a good way. It needs to link on to the very soul of your being and 'invade' that body. It needs to replicate, expand and be as forceful as it can be – scarily, it is indeed beginning to look dangerously viral if I keep this analogy going! But, hopefully, a friendly and invigorating "virus", not one that might destroy. At least, we hope it does not.

The most powerful word in today's extract is, in my opinion, 'awe'. Awe came upon everyone present – awe suggests more than just enthusiasm or encouragement – awe suggests a sensation beyond description, beyond human limitation of thought – awe suggests that of God. I have always believed that it is the awesomeness of faith's power over us that enables it to be the dominant factor in our lives. I do not want an explanation. I do not want a fixed definition. I need God to fascinate, to enwrap, to nudge, to even irritate – and I need a seamless flow of that awe. Today's extract from Acts hints at precisely that, and look where that led. And hopefully continues to lead, far and beyond the realms of "Corona's" version of our world.

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