

FROM FEAR TO WITNESS

STUDY THREE—FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

Acts 2.42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe 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.

We come to the end of the Peter's sermon at Pentecost. The question is, So what? We examined last week how Peter answered their question, "what must we do?" The response of repentance, baptism into the name of Jesus and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. This seems like a response that must be deeply personal. And it is.

However, three thousand people personally responded in this way. Now what? Today's reading from Acts brings the story to its close. It results in a functioning community.

I sometimes wonder if we had written the story if we might have stopped at verse 41. The individual is all that there is. A short-term high is all that there is. Toss in a bit of celebrity surrounded by three thousand. That might well suit our times, but apparently not God's purposes for his Creation. God wants a people. Our readings today will reinforce that vision each in their own way. Individuals are necessary to God's purposes but they are not sufficient without others just like them. The story of Jesus and its world-transforming consequences find their focal point embodied in a community.

This community has four parts to its foundation that that are its source of strength, authority, guidance and continuing witness, despite the headwinds that will certainly follow.

First, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. That teaching is quite complex. It includes the history and teaching of Jesus, his crucifixion for the forgiveness of sins and resurrection for our justification. It also includes expounding the story of God in the Old Testament and differentiating that teaching from the politics, cults and inherited religion that surrounded them. At the same time, they had to find points of contact in thought, culture, actions and language in the surrounding menagerie of human life. That would develop throughout Acts but it is incipient here. The foundation of their life and mission was unrelenting, solid theological reflection and debate. Not conducted by an elite priesthood but by everyone. The leaders' job was to lead it in its continuing search in how to understand the revelation in Jesus, how to live and how to communicate it. The church is a creative, theological community, whose catalyst is mission.

The central authority was the risen Lord, ascended to his ruling position as the Lord of church and the creation. We are responsible for living truly under his loving and just rule, explaining that rule to ourselves and to others in our contexts.

Second, they lived in fellowship. We like the word tolerance in our world. It is vague, and has little responsibility attached to it. It amounts to warm feelings and a comfortable life without conflict.

This fellowship produced commonality of goods, selling off wealth to serve the needs of others. Signs and wonders witness to it just as it did in Jesus' day. The kingdom comes and overturns all the social, economic and religious arrangements we make to keep each other at bay. That is what believing in the resurrection means in practice. It is not a theoretical proposition to be endlessly debated but a truth about the authority of Jesus to be lived out. The kingdom comes in unsettling, substantial and specific ways that goes beyond the bounds of safe and conventional friendship.

Some have read this part of the story as a model to be copied for all time; a type of Christian communism. Alternatively, others have dismissed it as an idealised and romanticised creation of the later church. The first has no evidence for it throughout the early period of Christianity including the story in Acts. The second is more a modern failure of Christian nerve lacking confidence that the resurrection faith is anything more than wishful thinking. These first believers had their social and political world turned upside down. They knew.

Third, this church engaged in the breaking of bread. We found the same thing on the road to Emmaus when Jesus met two mourning and lost disciples. We discussed there that the comprehensive way to think about this is to focus on the celebratory feast to which God calls us all, the great heavenly banquet when creation is restored and we rejoice (Luke 22.30).

In the present, then, we practice this weekly in the Eucharist. We share the great journey to the new creation with each other, sharing its joys and its burdens and sorrows. We also share our daily table, our daily bread with each other. Notice what Luke says, "They broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts." Eating together is a sign of unity, solidarity and deep friendship where contrived social barriers are broken down. When Jesus ate with sinners, he caused uproar in his world. He failed to make socially acceptable distinctions. In Luke the time of eating is a time of fellowship, revelation (think Emmaus again) and controversy. The resurrection turned things topsy-turvy again.

Fourth, prayers were central and critical. In this time, they attended the Temple to keep continuity with the story of God told by Israel and prayed the psalms in joy and lament. Praise was a notable element because they wished to commend what they had experienced in Jesus. It was worth talking about.

In this radical spiritual environment, bursting with the energy of the Holy Spirit people listened and paid attention with goodwill. Goodwill is a disposition of great significance. It opens up the possibilities of dialogue. It will not always be present.

Question

Several questions arise in this passage for spirituality and mission. What part can creative theological play? The spirituality described here is not some ethereal or enthusiastic outburst; it testifies to unsettling change. How might that help us form a missional spirituality?

The movement in this story challenges our emphasis on individual actors towards the true concern of the story – the community. How can we build a spirituality of community?

How might we enhance goodwill? What creates barriers to goodwill? How important might it be as a missiological category?

1 Peter 2.1-10

²Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built* into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him* will not be put to shame.'

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,
'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner',

⁸and
'A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,* in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Peter turns from the discussion on salvation and holiness we discussed in the last study to explore how that might work out in the community. He does that in two ways; by pointing out problems they may have brought to the community's table from their past and the turns to what their true status is.

He tells them to leave their old muddy shoes outside the door (2.1-3). When we baptised in the rivers and ponds people would line up on one side in their old clothes, plunge into the water to be baptised and leave the water, discreetly changing into new clothes out of their old. The old was no more. The new was here.

The list of 'old clothes is hideously grimy. They are all the products of self-interested power and corrosive of all community. Malice is conscious desire to harm someone. Guile is everything that is not straightforward, full of devious means and crooked ways of dealing with people. Hypocrisy we hate but, if we can get away with it, so much the better; hiding our real motives behind our outer respectability and apparent sincerity. Envy troubled the

early church as much as it does us. Resentment is a powerful and destructive habit. Slander destroys others ruthlessly and deliberately.

The community lives by trust and mutuality. It cannot survive any of the above. In the church today we worry about all sorts of things but rarely about these. Yet they are high on Peter's agenda. We brush them off as personal peccadilloes but Peter sees them (and not sexuality) as utterly destructive of everything the gospel stands for; destructive of mission and corrosive of spiritual life.

So, he recommends wiping them off our shoes. Instead, being freshly born into a fresh new world we need to get used to the food this new world offers. Peter calls this spiritual milk although the word associated with spirit is not used here. It is more associated with word and reason. I usually think of this as in 1.25 "the word of the Lord endures forever." True spiritual growth arises from "tasting that the Lord is good". The living Word nourishes us through the enduring word so we can grow in salvation. Note that salvation is a dimension we grow into. We don't own it all at once. We grow.

Peter turns to the question, what is this church? Is it just an afterthought? Is it a functional response to the success of Christian preaching? Is it an interesting sociological phenomenon? The answer to those is no. There is another way of looking at this body that frames it another way entirely.

That framework comes from the story of Israel and its scriptures using Psalm 118.22; Isaiah 8.14 and 28.16.

The church does not begin its institutional life, which is where we tend to begin today. It begins with us come to the Living Stone; finding solidity and life in the risen Christ. Rejected for sure, but in God's sight precious. Our share in this Living Stone is to become living stones ourselves, shaped by the Living Stone, into his house. This spiritual house is packed with living stones acting as priests, offering sacrifices in the shape of their whole life. This is God's new house, God's new priesthood offering sacrifices of transformed lives nurtured by the Living Stone. The one thing precious is the Living Stone.

From that the nature of the church is shaped by God's history with His people. Remember we studied the idea of chosen or elect in Study One. Its central core is calling to fulfill God's purposes for creation.

The priesthood belongs to all as does royalty. Obviously, we are in the realm of metaphor here. As living stones we share the status of the Living Stone. We share his royalty, his priesthood, his holiness and his living relation with God.

We have one purpose; to let the world know God's mighty acts in Jesus the Messiah that lead folk from the darkness of absence into the light of loving fellowship. Because of our new status the calling and responsibility belongs to us all. All our life together must serve this end.

A little note.

Verse 8b is a little reminder of the mystery of unbelief. Why would anyone turn down God's good gift of loving fellowship as described in the gospel? We might answer, God hardened their hearts or, they hardened their own hearts. Today, our preference would be to use the language of choice; their choice, their problem. That sounds plausible to us in our culture. After all, God has no interest in what we do, much less

get involved. I think that this a rather heartless point of view. We can shrug and walk away. But what if there is a hidden, complex relationship happening between the person refusing the offer and God, one that we cannot even comprehend.

The language Peter uses comes from the ancient story tellers and prophets in scripture. The best illustration is the conflict between Pharoah and God in Exodus that results in the plagues. God hardens, Pharoah hardens. We are caught on the horns of a paradox. The language here highlights that.

This is more than a puzzle; a jigsaw is a puzzle and a little observation and thought can figure it out. A mystery is a journey into paradox without any guarantee that we can resolve it. The only resources we have are own experiences of God's will and our will and the witness of others. Often our spiritual life is like the man's who said to Jesus in utter desperation over his son's plight, 'I believe, help my unbelief'. That is the mystery of our own unbelief.

This verse is not a proof text for double predestination. In its context it is a reminder of the complexity of human interactions with other wills, especially God's active participation. These are areas we need to live through together theologically and spiritually.

Question

How can we develop patterns that will help us grow spiritually? How can this help us rid ourselves of the muck we have dragged with us into the community?

How might our new status in Christ help us build foundations for a spiritual life that is not solely concerned with ourselves?

How might the very clear statement of the calling of the church help us to assess our present institutional life?

John 10.1-10

¹⁰'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

The little parable that begins the Gospel begins a well-known part of John's Gospel in which Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd. Images of sheep and shepherds dominate this teaching which ends in the ominous rejection of Jesus on the grounds that he has a demon.

Jesus begins with a riddle, proverb, or parable about sheep and sheep pens, thieves and robbers and gatekeepers. This little story points in many directions and Jesus picks up some of those as he speaks.

The sheep are in a pen which indicates that someone owns them and has invested in protecting them, a wise business decision. Thus, it is easy to tell the difference between who the owners or agents of the owners are and thieves. The gate is key. Their actions betray them; which one uses the entrance?

Further, the sheep know the owner's voice. In fact, each sheep has a name and they know it and the shepherd knows each one's name. Strangers can't get the sheep to willingly follow because they do not know the voice. It is the deep personal connection of years spent valuing each sheep. The thief will have to use some form of coercion to force them to follow.

For one, the sheep are a product to be bought and sold, good only for making money. For the other, they are animals of great value in themselves which the owner sees of individual worth.

No wonder they didn't have a clue what he was talking about. This obscure pastoral idyll seems hardly worth the time to think about. As with much that Jesus says it might be unwise to write him off as a pastoral romantic.

The saying 'I am the gate for the sheep' sharpens from romantic pastoral idyll to a knife edge of differentiation and critique.

His naming himself 'I am he' has already occurred in John 4 in his conversation with the Samaritan woman. It is a direct reference to God's name revealed to Israel through Moses. It is God's covenant name that promises liberation and lasting relationship with Israel. It is a confronting use by Jesus that challenges everything of the culture around him. To them, that could not be. His claim is ridiculous.

Now he adds a qualifier to 'I am he' which tells us something significant about 'I am.' 'I am the gate for the sheep'. This directly and openly challenges the political and religious leadership of his time, especially in Jerusalem. It might not seem clear to us but the logic of the story is now revealed. The gate is the only valid point of entrance. There is only one gate and he is it. This is an exclusive claim, first of all, about how the sheep enter. If he is the gate then he is the exclusive point of entry. Later on, he would say 'I am the way...'. Not one way but the only way? 'I am the gate' states the same proposition.

I think that in modern Christianity this is quite a challenge. It has always been a challenge and the history of Christian thinking is one long battle over what this means. To our modern ears, tuned to the relativism of all religious beliefs, this is a serious challenge.

Jesus claims exclusive rights to the sheep. He knows them. To them they are not marketable products but each a life who need to find life and pasture and they find it in him. The thief will seek the sheep only for their value to him. Thieves govern God's covenant people. Can it more confronting?

This also reveals the covert political themes buried here. They will come out when Jesus declares himself to be the good shepherd just as God is (Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34) and as great kings might be. The good shepherd is not a bucolic pastoral image but a direct challenge the political status quo of his day.

Question

How can a spirituality that takes 'I am the gate' seriously impact on our view of our calling in the world?

Again, if we take the 'I am' seriously how do we go about our calling in a world that is hostile to such notions?

To approach this another way, should we drop the idea that Jesus is the 'I am'? Would that solve our problem? By the way, which is?

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. What would a spirituality that encompasses this statement of Jesus' purpose look like? How might it help us structure our mission calling?

At the end of each of the studies I am going to mention some of the BIG QUESTIONS we will have to discuss as we go about the daily business of living our lives in the Presence of the risen One.

THEOLOGY

We noted how seriously the early church paid attention to theology. I will leave you with a couple of quotes from a Dutch theologian A van de Beek to think about.

"Theology...attempts critically to review the assertions Christians make. They are tested in the light of the real actions of God. For Christians do not make their assertions at random; they are of the opinion that in making them they are doing justice to God; they believe they are correctly saying that God is as they say."

He then goes on, "No theology is perfect. We are always looking for a better model."

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