

HYMNS: CH4 124 – “Praise to the Lord;” CH4 462 – “The King of love my Shepherd is;” CH4 542 – “Lord, speak to me, that I may speak; ” CH4 595 – “O Breath of life, come sweeping through us.”

Reading Acts 2; 42 – 47

Reflection

During last week, I had a brief e-mail conversation with one of the people working on the changes that are being made in our Church of Scotland structures and policies as we try to adapt and become a Church fit for the future. He said that most of the work was halted for the present because ‘what the Church has had to become, through social distancing, will now have to be factored into our strategy and thinking.’ It gave me pause for thought ‘what the Church has had to become!’

Then this week, one of our readings is this brief passage from Acts describing the early Church. In a very real sense, that Church too, was what ‘it had to become.’ The earliest Christians didn’t have the luxury of sitting down and designing the Church. In the earliest days, they had no thought of being a Church at all, they remained within the Judaic community and as we can see from this passage, they worshipped at the Temple.

Whilst Luke is trying on the one hand to recount the historical detail as he remembers it, on the other hand, he is also giving some foundations to a later generation of Christians (remember Luke’s words and memories were not to take written form until many years after Jesus death).

Bill Loader, an Australian theologian writes

‘Devotion to the apostles’ teaching is certainly a core element. Luke, after all, seeks to serve such teaching by writing his gospel. The “fellowship” includes both being together and learning together. “Fellowship” without learning together falls short of being Christian community. To it also belongs breaking bread and prayers. Breaking bread probably alludes to eucharistic celebration - at least as it would be heard by people of Luke’s time. In other words, Luke gives us an image of Christian community centred on worship, learning, and celebration of Holy Communion.’

Then we have, as almost an aside ‘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.’ It is difficult for us to recover from all these centuries on, what Luke really meant here, whether this was an early experiment in a kind of Christian communism. Undoubtedly though, the early Christians, seem to have been marked by outstanding generosity.

Recent weeks have left many people perplexed and wondering after seeing images of empty supermarket shelves as people stockpiled particular items (and sometimes very strange items) at the start of the Pandemic. Many people, I suspect, were left shocked and wondering at themselves as they got sucked into the frenzy. What has that got to do with the radical sharing described in Acts? Abundance and the ability to trust in that abundance, are the main things that make such a rich sharing possible. When human beings become anxious that there is not enough to go round, we can become possessive and begin to be jealous about what **we** need. If we think everything is in limited supply, then we try to make sure that we have enough and it that means someone else can’t have it, then too bad!

Yet, throughout the Bible, the emphasis is on abundance – that God provides abundantly and whatever we think about the strategy practised by the early Christians, the underlying values by which they lived reflected Jesus values. Resources are there to be shared. There is no room for greed. As is often said, ‘A community that wants to preach good news for the poor needs to *be* good news for the poor’

When we eventually emerge from lockdown, it will be interesting to see what the Church has had to become. It will be more interesting still, to see what we choose to become. If nothing else, these period has given us time, time to reflect, to consider, to pray. It has given us time to consider our priorities. I suspect too, that coming face to face with the pandemic, has not just given us time, but has given us the impetus, to think about what is important to us.

Often, those outside the Church see us as just another group or association. A gathering of people who are like-minded and who pursue the same interests. A gathering of people who will only welcome others who have the same interests. But Luke’s picture of the early Church presents us with a much more radical image of the Church. Luke describes a Christian community. The level of commitment to one

another and to God was such that possessions were no longer personal but communal, so that no one was in need. It was not a matter of 'me and my faith' but 'us and our faith'. Their meals were not just opportunities to share a story but to celebrate a totally transforming event. It was not a matter of church services and an occasional meeting but a total lifestyle. This is what made people take notice. The early Christians were not like other groups or associations, they had something more dynamic and committed — and it was attractive.

Luke's little picture of the early Church, provides us with much food for thought. We can of course, when all this is over, just go back to doing exactly what we were doing before, but just now, we have an opportunity like no other, to think back to the foundations on which the Church was built as Luke has described them here, and to pray and listen for what God is calling us to be and to do as we move forward into God's future.