

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Acts 4:23-37 ("The Believers Share Their Possessions")

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, 'Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

"Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things?

The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah."

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.' When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Come, children, join and sing (CH: 185)

We have heard a joyful sound (CH: 249)

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you (CH: 191)

My song is love unknown (CH: 399)

As a fire is meant for burning (CH: 252)

To wander into Longniddry Parish Church and open up the Traidcraft cupboard is a bit like stepping back in time. As you look over the “Best Before” dates on all those bars of chocolate and jars of jam you realise that the stock which is stored there is firmly rooted in the early months of 2020, just before the pandemic hit. In a way, the cupboard itself is something of a snapshot of how things use to be in the days when we were allowed to buy and sell fair trade produce week by week. That same cupboard, of course, can also serve as an inspiration to us for what can lie ahead in a society free of coronavirus restrictions.

The fair trade movement has found the last two years very difficult. If you look at the website www.fairtrade.net you can see for yourself all the difficulties and stresses which Covid-19 brought to farmers in some of the world’s poorest areas. Similarly, if you ask Christian Aid Scotland about the pandemic’s impact on parts of the world that were already struggling prior to March 2020, you will hear about the many ways in which the British churches’ development agency has had to adapt its work to bring new hope in the face of appalling tragedy. No wonder then that last year the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Lord Wallace, launched an appeal in conjunction with Christian Aid to buy the most basic of essentials for communities grappling with the horrors of Covid-19 - simple things like bars of soap, face masks, hand sanitiser, all of which we take for granted. Reliable stocks of these items can mean the difference between life and death for people in places like India right now.

Whether we are talking about the Fair Trade movement, Christian Aid or local congregational fund-raising for aid programmes, one thing is clear: the church cares about the lives of those people who are among the world’s poorest. And today, at the start of Fair Trade Fortnight 2022, it is right that we should pause to think about why the church is so passionate about global social justice issues of this type. Outsiders looking in might wonder why we choose to invest our time and our prayers and our money to help others in terrible need. For us, however, it should simply be a matter of opening our Bibles and seeing what people of faith have always been doing. And we see that clearly in today’s reading from the Bible.

Our story from the book of Acts shows us “the earliest Church” (those Christian believers many of whom had followed Jesus in his earthly ministry). These brave people of faith are facing hardship and uncertainty, persecution and hatred. Acts chapter 4 reminds us that both Herod and Pilate had played their part in the killing of Jesus. And now, we are told, the beleaguered Christ followers of Jerusalem are coming up against enemies from both camps: the Jewish leaders and the Romans. Everyone had seen what happened on Good Friday, so everyone knows that standing up to authority in all its terrible power can be a dangerous thing indeed.

So what do these Christians decide to do in response to the threat they are facing? In effect, they decide to create a community that is governed not by weight of weaponry, but by weight of love: a caring love which shows the world that their standards would be different to those of both Temple and Empire. This caring love would mark out those who practised it as being highly unusual people, more concerned with living in a Christ-like way, and far, far less concerned with personal gain or privileged comfort.

If you want to know what Jerusalem’s earliest Church was all about, it was all about that special X-factor which gave that tiny little community its incredibly special identity. Moreover, this same X-factor has been studied by Christians right the way down the centuries to see how it might be harnessed and applied in a later age.

Perhaps then, this little section of Acts chapter 4 might give us a glimpse into the ways of *1st century faith* which can help us in framing our own *21st century faith*.

What made these people so very different from those around them? (And, dare I suggest, what also made them so very different from *us* today?) Let's look at some phrases picked from Acts chapter 4, letting them be our guide to the earliest church. Here's what the passage tells us:

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul ...":

Even in the midst of their sufferings, hemmed in on every side by hostility, the Christian community of Jerusalem was united by an unswerving faith in the Risen Lord. And why shouldn't they have been united? These were Easter people who had witnessed the Resurrection first hand, living through the day of Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit in the church. If anyone had a God-given right to be "of one heart and soul", it was these good people. It is what gave them their passion.

"... everything they owned was held in common ...":

Everything? Surely not! Well, just consider what Acts chapter 4 goes on to say:

There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

The faith of the church was a faith that had no place for personal security or petty selfishness. It was going places, and going places *together* in such a way that each individual would be valued irrespective of what money or property they might or might not have. Some might call it early Communism. A better term has been coined by J.D. Crossan, who simply calls it "Enough-ism", by which all can have what they need, sharing in the church's life.

"... the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus ...":

Some of these people (perhaps many) had laid eyes upon the marks on the Risen Christ's hands and feet and side. Many had known the Spirit's presence in the church on that Day of Pentecost. Who then could be surprised at their evangelistic zeal. Indeed, one of the great proofs of the earliest church's effectiveness is seen in its ability to win converts from the Jewish community *and* the Gentile community, both at once. Their clearly articulated message that Jesus had risen from death was no dry theology but a reality lived out through this passionate faith - a faith which was swiftly proving to be as vibrant and compelling as it was amazing.

"... great grace was upon them all":

Grace: the free and unmerited favour of God. What was going on in the Holy City was no slick PR exercise dreamt up by the friends of a martyred rebel. This had the hand of God firmly upon it, with God building up the church both in numbers and in commitment.

"There was not a needy person among them":

What else needs to be said about this new and unique community? This was a society in which divisions were set to one side, with wealth and poverty ironed out to a remarkable degree of tablecloth flatness until not one single human being wanted for the essentials of living. In our advanced 21st century life, which country could boast such a level of social inclusion?

This Fair Trade Fortnight, if you want to know why the church cares for people who are so often forgotten, just pick up your Bible and take a trip back to 33AD and those words of Acts chapter 4. By doing this you might change your thinking and your doing. You might even help change the world. Amen.

Praying for others

Dear Lord,
entering Fairtrade Fortnight
let us be challenged by these words from Christian Aid:
*As I enter the street market, wheel my trolley at the superstore,
leaf through a catalogue, or log on to the internet:
be with me and help me.*
*When I spend money, help me to see the market place as you see it,
as wide as the world you love so much.*
*Help us to challenge inequality and poor trade practices and
to share the markets we share for all people.*

Lord, we understand that championing fair trade starts with our own purchases, and calls on us to challenge global trade practises that continue to marginalise the poorest people and countries in the world.

Help us to be a voice for the voiceless, speaking out against injustice and inequity.

Today we also pray for the citizens of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus caught up in political manoeuvres and the threat of war. We pray for real and lasting peace around the world where there is war or a fragile peace:

for Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Ethiopia, the Yemen, Afghanistan and Syria.

All these prayers we ask in Jesus' Name. Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers evolution:

You may notice a bit of a theme to some of these ponderings of mine - television. You could argue I should get out and do more and you may not be wrong. But long winter nights (though they are getting noticeably shorter) just seem to encourage a coorie-up in front of the box.

Recently I've been watching the latest David Attenborough series about plants. Like all his series it is utterly fascinating. In the first programme about forests, there was a section on leaf-cutting ants, a fungus and the trees the ants use. The fungus lives only in the ants' nest. It is basically farmed by the ants - the leaves they bring to the nest feed the fungus. The fungus provides food for the ant larvae and Queen. The fungus sends signals to the ants to "instruct" them as to which kind of leaves it wants them to bring back for it. After a while the trees (which the ants might otherwise strip bare and damage under guidance from the fungus) also send a signal to tell the fungus to stop asking the ants to collect its leaves. The fungus duly changes its instructions to the ants.

The close interrelationship between all these species is truly wondrous. It made me think, not for the first time, about evolution. There are some who find majesty and power of God in the idea of a creation over six literal days. I'm afraid I'm not one of them. How on earth did the ants, fungus and trees evolve into their intimately connected eco-system? How did it start? What genetic changes took place over millions of years to allow it? It seems incomprehensible that such a thing could have evolved. And yet it has. Truly, evolution is a miracle.