

The Church – from then to now

Epistle: Acts 4:32-35
Gospel: John 20:19-31

Easter 2

Today is what many churches call Low Sunday, as attendance is low, along with the Easter Sunday adrenaline we all enjoyed last week. In many ways it's a lot like other Weeks After: the week after the wedding, the graduation, the birth, the death. One wonders: what now? Things will never be the same, but how will they be different?

This is a story about the weeks, years and millennia after that first Easter. It begins with the disciples gathered in a safe house with the doors locked, their minds numb with grief and fear. Then suddenly they woke from their thoughts to find Jesus, who could no more be kept out of a locked room than he could be contained in a sealed tomb, standing among them. "Greetings", he said, "Shalom, peace be with you". And with this the fear and stress of the last few days began to ebb away as the disciples believed and rejoiced.

Jesus brought peace and joy, comfort and healing, but his next words made it clear that this was not simply a therapeutic visit: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". And so, just as he himself had left the safest of homes, he sent them out of their safe house into the world to continue his work.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives an example of this continuation. Here we see a small group of Jesus' followers living a transformative life based on sharing with each other and caring for the most vulnerable, the least and the lost. This was the seed from which the church has grown, from the earliest missionary outposts in Nigeria to the great cathedrals of Europe. This movement, for all its mistakes and misdirections, has held onto the one fundamental truth, that our creator is a God of immeasurable love, who has come to our world to teach a troubled human race the true meaning of healing, justice, community and hope.

Of course, it hasn't all been plain sailing. Luke tells us that the original group was "of one heart and soul". But as the number of Christians grew and began to include Gentiles, so too did the arguments. One of the first concerned circumcision, a rather painful operation for adult men; another was whether Gentiles should follow the Jewish food laws. In both cases the Gentiles were let off the hook, and as Paul continued his work they soon became the majority of

Christian believers.

We are also told that there was no private ownership among the earliest Christians, with all goods being held in common. That didn't last long either. In 312 AD the emperor Constantine became a Christian, and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. As Christianity became fashionable it began to suffer the fate of all fashions. It attracted the rich and famous, and provided a quick route to influence and power for the leaders of the new imperial church with Rome at the centre.

One of the main activities of the new imperial church was to sponsor arguments about topics that nobody could understand: about whether Jesus was created or begotten, whether God was one substance or two or three, whether Jesus was one person or two, whether substances were the same as persons, and how many angels could dance on the top of a pin.

Since there were no definitive answers to these arguments people took to writing creeds and calling those who disagreed heretics. They went on to create rules about who could or couldn't be priests or bishops and what you had to do or believe in order to get into heaven. In the centuries that followed the church has experienced schisms, inquisitions and religious wars as people and establishments have surrendered the pursuit of love in favour of the pursuit of power and perfection.

But throughout those often troubled times, there were countless people who never let go of Jesus' example of love and service, and who continued to live out their faith by working to make the world a better place. They testified, prayed, fed the hungry and visited prisoners. It is these countless quiet souls whose lives remained rooted in Jesus' example of love and service who have kept the faith alive from early beginnings to the present day.

And so to the present day. There are now more than 2 billion Christians in the world, separated into about 45,000 denominations: Anglicans, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists and so on. And of course, leaders and members spend a lot of time disagreeing with each other about beliefs, styles of worship, the rights of women and minorities, even vestments and clothing. Because that seems to be human nature. But perhaps that is not entirely a bad thing because argument can be a good way of refining our views and coming closer to understanding the world and human life. It is only bad when arguments lead to hatred and the breakdown of relationships. What is

needed, especially among Christians who are called to love our enemies is learning to live with disagreement.

When the Lord appeared to his disciples in that locked room many years ago, they saw the same Jesus they had known and loved – the same but different, carrying the scars of his earthly wounds. When we look at our church today, we see many similarities with the early church – the same, but different, carrying the scars of our sometimes dark history. What those early Christians were doing was not unlike what we do here: They worshipped, studied the scriptures, shared the Eucharist, served others and prayed for the world.

We continue to disagree about many things, but we are learning to take the time to listen and respect the views of others, including those who do not share our faith or culture. And while all our possessions are not held in common, Christian people have always been extremely generous with their time and talents, helping at food banks, visiting the sick and distressed, working and praying for justice and peace. As we travel with our fellow Christians from all times and all places we do our best to hold onto two fundamental properties: courage and love. What kind of courage? The quiet and good humoured courage of ordinary people whose lives may not be easy but who never for a moment expect to be defeated. What kind of love? The real, true and rock solid love that is the foundation for everything else.

Amen

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