

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B, 2021

Psalm 133, Acts 4.32-35, John 20.10-31

Today's readings, especially the readings from the Acts of the Apostles and Psalm 133 pack a punch. In the psalm we are given a striking picture of the blessings of unity.

When people live in unity

“It is like the precious oil on the head,

running down upon the beard,

on the beard of Aaron,

running down over the collar of his robes.” (Psalm 133)

The references to Mount Hermon in the north and Mount Zion in the south situate this psalm in a time when the Kingdom was divided into the North and the South Kingdoms. The psalm given this context is saying, “In our differences it is a blessing to dwell in unity.” It is like oil running down upon the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is a picture of abundance. The dew coming from Mount Hermon in the north blesses the kingdom huddled around Mount Zion in the south. Our well-being is to be found in being a blessing to the other from whom we may be separated by geography, by political realities, by ethnicity, by culture, by perceptions to name a few.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles provides us with another picture. The placing of the reading on the Sunday after Easter Day provides a clue how to understand it in the life of the Church, the body of Christ as a community and a unity.

Before we go forward we must return first to Easter Day and Christ's tomb. The sealed tomb is as much a symbol as is the open tomb. The closed and open tombs signal different realities. The one we live in and the one we are being called into. To understand the importance of the open tomb you must first appreciate the symbolism of the sealed tomb. The sealed tomb represents all the life that we have locked away, safely enclosed or securely sealed including the finality of death. The sealed tomb represents the hopes that we have put to one side. The open tomb reality allows for a life that is fed by dreaming of a future in which each is servant, loves as Christ loves us, while having an eye for the other. Water Brueggemena building on the imagery of the foot washing writes, ‘Make sure that the space between you and others is filled with a towel, the towel of Maundy Thursday.’ The sealed tomb in contrasts with the open tomb.

We who are baptised into Christ's death are also baptised into his resurrection, which is a new life not to death everlasting, but a life lived in fullness and abundance in God to which hopes, dreams, sharing and a common faith belong. The abundance of which I speak is not in the first instance a material state of well-being, but rather a spiritual one. This spiritual state of well-being, being at one with God as in the word atonement "at-one-ment" read salvation, God's work in us – this spiritual state of course impacts on the material as the reading from the Acts of the Apostles makes abundantly clear...

Turn to the Acts reading as printed in the order of service and follow the rereading of the passage. "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."

Although our time is short there are a few things that I want to highlight. First, in the context of this sermon those who believed were of one heart and mind. Unity in belief, a unity characterised by shared belief in both heart and mind, where words and actions match up, is a prerequisite to what follows, "... no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" meaning that there was no needy person amongst them. People even sold land and houses to ensure that there might be a fair distribution of wealth, so that all received what they needed. "Give us this day our daily bread". The community could do this because they believed that God had acted decisively. They could venture something bold, even great. Having laid aside fear they were assisted by both great grace and great power. (Acts 4.32-35)

Like Mark's Easter gospel the Acts passage is framed. Mark's gospel is framed by women, who are at first despondent and then respond by being afraid, terror-struck, as well as amazed. Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a fleeting glimpse of a changed community with boldness to live a new life. The reality of Easter, the open tomb, the Easter message give birth to a particular community ordered that no one may have need. The organisation of a common life is what frames the passage.

At the heart of the Easter gospel a message emanates from the open tomb. "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. ... you will see him, just as he told you." (Mark 16.6,7) At the heart of the Acts

reading we read, “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4.33) At the heart of our life, our service, our common life there must be faith, as well as a readiness to proclaim Christ crucified, and him risen! Note here that both grace and power in this short passage are qualified by the word great.

Two asides. First, in a prayer that I use, addressed to the Holy Spirit, there is one line in which I as supplicant beseech God “to grant us powers greater than our own powers”. This is the power out of which all who believe then and now can give testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The other is that each person has phrases or figures of speech that they may consciously or unconsciously employ in prayer. Robert for example likes to use the word great as in great blessing, great power and great grace, but always in reference to God as the provider of what may be called great. Is he being guided by this reading from Acts.

In drawing to a close we return to the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. There are two aspects to today’s reading. The proclamation of Christ risen comes out of the centre of the lived faith in community... lived in unity in a challenging way for us who follow the apostolic church in time and Jesus risen today. The community and the message are one. They need each other. They are dependent on one another. They feed each other. Both become to one another like the dew from Mount Hermon falling on Mount Zion. The message proclaimed and lived in community – this necessarily means mutual dependence for the purpose of authentic living. A spiritual reality is what gives shape to the community and its approach to material things.

In and through Jesus, King of the Jews, God has acted decisively. Those who believe with one heart and mind respond boldly, adventurously and decisively. The whole group, literally multitude, are one in heart and mind in believing, while seeking to be faithful to their Jewish heritage and this new thing that God in Christ Jesus has accomplished, shown, made manifest, revealed. The message, the belief held in both heart and mind, issues into action both in deed and word. Each feeding on the other. Where one or other of these aspects breaks down the community is impaired in its living out and its proclamation.

Next week we will launch a stewardship campaign. Any stewardship campaign worth its salt will remind us of the biblical truth that we often call to mind at the offertory, “... for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.” (1 Chronicles 29:14) What the

open tomb enables is for those who believe to live what they believe in community in unity, as we seek to be like the dew of Hermon falling on Zion. Always reliant on and assisted by God's great grace and great power.