

Oxley Uniting Church 6.30pm 8 April 2018

Readings:

Acts 4:32-35

Ps 133

1 Jn 1:1–2:2

Jn 20:19-31

Message

Do you believe in ghosts?

Thomas didn't. Poor old Thomas cops a hard time, but he represents the naturalist, the rationalist, the person who acts on the basis of evidence. Dead people don't rise, he knows that, and they certainly don't appear in locked rooms.

Have you experienced the supernatural, the paranormal, sensed spirits wandering this land?

Would it surprise you to know that some Christians have? Or that some Aboriginal Christians experience no conflict between their acceptance of a world filled with ancestral and Dreaming spirits and their Christian faith?

We all believe in the presence of at least one Spirit. We invoke him at every baptism, he lives within us, and we trust that he is in our presence whenever two or three of us are gathered together.

Do you believe in other things unseen?

You do. We believe in justice, democracy, community. You can't see any of these as physical things but only as our collective actions bring them into being.

Let's go back to the Gospel reading now. The disciples are telling Thomas that Jesus has been among them, appearing in a room with locked doors. Thomas, the rational one, says that is not possible and he won't believe it unless he sees and feels Jesus for himself.

Clearly, Thomas was not alone in his view of the world. Otherwise, the writers of 1 John would not have felt it necessary to declare that what they talked about they had heard themselves, they seen with their own eyes, they had looked at and touched with their own hands. The letter writers and the Gospel writer write so that others may believe and have fellowship with them and life with the Father and the Son. But they understand that many people want evidence to believe, even if it is second hand. It's not a stupid position to take in many instances.

Yet in the Gospel, Jesus says "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Think of this another way: happy are those who don't have to see something already existing, or experience it personally, to catch the vision. Not everyone can: Saul, later Paul, needed Jesus to blind him and speak in a disembodied voice before he would believe.

What happens when we come together and believe not just in the resurrected Christ but in the vision that he lived and preached while alive. We sit here in Church and we pray:

“Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

The temptation with this verse is to separate it, the kingdom as future, God’s will on earth the present. But I think that the Kingdom of Heaven is past, present, and future; always having been, always becoming until it is perfected when Christ returns.

So, back to the point: Has anyone among us seen something that we can clearly point at and declare that “this” is the kingdom of God? How do we work towards something that we haven’t seen? That we have to envision in a time and context very different to First Century Palestine? That we can’t clearly define beyond it being the state of God’s will reigning supreme. Especially if we can’t always agree on what God’s will is? And if it requires at least a degree of unity to achieve? John 17 tells us that Jesus prayed not just for his immediate disciples, but for all believers. According to the Gospel, he prayed:

“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be as one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have love me.”

The reading from Acts shows us how the Christians in the first Century went about displaying unity and working towards the Kingdom, telling us they were of “one heart and soul,” holding everything in common and selling all they had.

Now, I know that there are people who believe that they are called to live together in this fashion. But I don’t feel that way. A few weeks ago, I met three people who live in community in that way, in a kind of apartment block where they have one bank account, all work together, and have their main meals together. Frankly, I think I would go mad while driving everyone else around me mad at the same time. Some people are of the disposition where that will work. Maybe you are, I am not. And I don’t think it is just a matter of faith. For one thing, if I don’t get sufficient time on my own, I don’t cope very well. I’m an introvert. Living in close proximity with others for any length of time drains me rather than energises me.

So if the Acts community living model doesn’t work for all of us, what does unity look like in the modern Church? We often hear about the need for unity, but what does it mean for us in practical terms?

Does it mean that we all have to agree? There is no way that I’m ever going to agree with my friend here on matters of sexuality. It is highly unlikely that I’m ever going to agree with my other friend here on politics. Yet in each case, I’m pretty sure that our positions flow from our faith and I would not question the faith of either of my friends, even though we disagree on some pretty fundamental things.

I wrote out a version of this talk a week before the one that I'm giving now. I had pondered the question of unity for some time prior to that and I could not see how, in this day and age, it was possible to be 'of one mind.' Clearly, we aren't on a very many things and yet we struggle to live together regardless. But God kept prompting—you haven't got it yet. You're not finished writing. Go back to it. Look elsewhere. You can't do this on your own.

So, like any ex-academic, I started researching. One of the pieces that I came across was a translation of Peter Olivi's writings on the early Christian community. Olivi was a Franciscan monk who lived in the latter half of the 12th Century. He was wrestling with the nature and extent of poverty required by the Franciscan vows and this is how he came to be writing about the 1st Century community in Acts. The other one was a lot more modern and was written by someone called Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman. He acknowledges a tension in the whole Gospel of Luke and Acts combined narrative between the ideal of the wandering destitute and the exhortation to give alms to the poor. Clearly, if you're destitute, you are not in a position to give alms.

I don't know about you, but I have read the Acts passage, and heard it preached, this way so many times: you read the first sentence, pausing after the first phrase, rush through the rest about having possessions in common, the apostles, and the needy, and then preach on being of one mind. So, maybe I'm not the only one who is uncomfortable with the idea of communal living!

Olivi doesn't read this bit separately to the rest of the passage as I have tended to do. Reading his work, I came to see the second part of the passage as the demonstration of the first. Almost like when we put a semi-colon in a sentence and the second part expands upon or explicates the first part. The second part shows what is meant by the first part.

So let's look at the reading again and break it down into bits. 1. The whole group of believers were of one heart and soul.

Some translations have heart and soul, others have heart and mind. This puzzled me so I looked it up. For the Jews around that time, the heart was the seat of rational thought and the soul the seat of feeling. So the translation doesn't matter so much, it just means that they were together on the thinking bit and the feeling bit.

Olivi draws on Bede for his translation of the Greek. St Bede was an English monk who lived in the 6th and 7th Centuries and was known as a skilled linguist and translator, making many of the early Church writings available to the Anglo-Saxons.

Bede's commentary, according to Olivi, reckons that the Greek version he was working with went beyond saying the believers were of one heart and soul to say that "there was no disruptive separation among them," and then he (Bede) relates this to class, explaining that they "in no way pushed themselves forward ahead of others by exalting the dignity of their lineage." This leads into

2. No one claimed private ownership and they held everything in common, which I don't think can really be separated from

4. what they brought from the proceeds of their wealth was distributed to each as they had need.

Private wealth is the great divider and wealth often brings power. If everyone has the same access to material resources, this division diminishes and it facilitates communion and fellowship as equals in Christ. Bede's translation suggests that the reason why there was such grace and harmony among the believers was because there was none of them in need (266).

Now we could get caught up here in what precisely was meant by holding possessions in common and whether this allows for any private possession or whether things can be held for private use without possession as such, which is what Olivi does. (Reminds me of Umberto Eco's *The Name of The Rose*, the book, not the movie, which was turned into a romance. The major part of the book was a debate about whether Jesus owned his own robe—Franciscan monks again, you see.)

We can get caught up in the minute detail of precisely how the sharing worked, or we can look at the bigger principle that can be applied across the ages, in different economic systems, and diverse living arrangements.

Zimmerman suggests that what is important here (and Olivi kind of suggests it as well at one point) is not debates about economic structures or notions of possession and ownership, but our attitude to money and the importance that we place on it relative to people. Zimmerman says that rather than focusing on the models, we should focus on the commitment of the Christian community to meet the needs of the poor.

Money and possessions are not to be valued above people. My husband taught me a very important lesson in this regard when we had had a new (well, second hand) car for about a week. He reminded me that it was just a car and not as important as the feelings and well-being of the three year old who had just accidentally scratched the length of it with the handle of his trike. It was just a car!

If we put our commitment to those in need above wealth and possessions, then it is easier to give away our money and delay our material gratification in order to meet those needs. And meeting those needs is not just an idealistic suggestion of Acts 4, it is a consistent command throughout the Old and New Testaments.

The other side of this, of course, and this was also pointed out to me by my husband, is that the values and the commitment are worth nothing if not expressed in action. The world has no way of knowing our values and commitments if these are not demonstrated consistently in our actions. The proof is in the pudding.

What these additional commentaries have led me to is the idea that our unity is shown not in us all agreeing or holding the same opinion, but in our attitude to worldly wealth, and our commitment to each other and the poor.

South Africans have this wonderful word that I think is relevant here. I'm probably saying it wrong, but it is something like "Ubuntu." It is difficult to render into a Western language but, and I'm quoting here, "it speaks of the very essence of being human." When said of a person, it "means they are generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate. They share what they have. It also means that [our] humanity is inextricably bound up in theirs. We belong in a bundle of life." Another

person has described it this way, “we operate from the fact that I am because you are. You’ve got to be okay for me to be okay. Together, we can make it.” It is a wonderful concept, and I think captures something of the unity implied in Acts without the necessity of living in each other’s pockets.

The third part, that it would be so easy to overlook here, is

3. With great power the apostles gave their testimony . . . , and great grace was upon them all.

I might be going out on a limb in my interpretation here, but I would take this as indicating that powerful teaching and witness is what holds the people together and fosters the grace required to let go of worldly wealth, possessions, and prestige, and make concern for others the primary way of demonstrating the power of God’s salvation in our lives. As he has loved us, so should we love one another—freely and without expectation of favours in return. This doesn’t happen in isolation, we need to meet together.

In conclusion then, we can work to bring about God’s kingdom on earth. It is not just some future, other worldly reward for those who cling to an individual faith. When we demonstrate our unity by our commitment to people, especially people in need, instead of chasing after wealth, possessions, power, and prestige, as everything in the society around us encourages us to do, we live the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

Then it doesn’t matter so much how we do it. We don’t have to agree on everything. I might favour giving to community development projects that empower women. My friend might favour making personal micro loans directly to individuals in other countries. We have very different politics, different ideas about how to alleviate poverty, but we’re both demonstrating our commitment to Christ through attending to the needs of the poor.

What worship style we prefer, who we find ourselves attracted to, our political leanings, differing interpretations of specific passages of scripture, oppositional opinions on various topics—while they are important to us individually, are not the way that we demonstrate Christian unity and are not what the world is looking for in us. Being concerned with spiritual virtues over material things and compassion and provision for those in need are.

References

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