

Mark Chapman, Easter 4, 3 May 2020

Acts 2.42-47

John 10.1-10

In these weeks after Easter the first reading comes from the Acts of the Apostles – I have always found it a rather restless book with an awful lot of energy. There is a great deal of frenetic activity as the apostles share their excitement of the resurrection and want to share their experience of new life with the people around them. And after the early believers had repented and accepted the apostles' teaching, so they entered into fellowship with one another – they broke bread and gathered together in one another's houses. *Sharing* was obviously very much a part of the early experience of the Christians. In the passage we heard we are told that people held all things in common – they sold their possessions and gave to the common purse, giving everything they had. There is a frightening story a little later in the book about what happens to those who don't give everything away – Ananias sold his property, but kept a little bit back for himself. And Peter found this quite inexcusable: in his typically direct way he said: 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?' In response, Ananias is struck down dead. Three hours later the same thing happens to his wife, Sapphira. The message is clear – God will strike down people who lie about what they own: every penny belongs to God. Fear of being struck down by the Holy Spirit would be good for church stewardship.

In the passage that comes immediately before this double tragedy there is a short description of what life was like in the early churches, which resembles our first reading – the whole group, it says, was of one heart and soul, says the writer, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they held was held in common; 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. Quite clearly, the author wants to show a community which did not live according to the ways of the past or the ways of the world outside where private property was becoming more and more important; instead he gives a picture of a community which was based on commonality and sharing, and where none would be hungry and none would be excluded. And this obviously required a commitment and a willingness to give up everything on the part of its members. That's the lesson of Ananias and Sapphira.

If we look back from our own perspective to the early church it might seem as though the great Christian ideal of simplicity and commonality has quite disappeared. We can no longer live like that – our world is infinitely more complex. All that tends to suggest that from our vantage point, we simply cannot return to the early church. A favourite story of

mine is of a parson in a small country parish in Dorset at the turn of the twentieth century who was so disgusted at the inequalities of what he saw around him that he decided he would go off and join the monastery at Mirfield founded by Charles Gore. He would live the common life enjoined by the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. So he resigned his wealthy living and gave up all his possessions and went off to Mirfield in Yorkshire. But as soon as he got on the train to Wakefield he realised that it wasn't as straightforward as all that. And it was the ticket collector who reminded him of this. In order for him to live the common life, other people had to do the other jobs – and at the time they weren't being given a fair wage: railway workers were among the most exploited of all workers in this country and they often went on strike to improve their lot.

Escaping into a monastery didn't mean he could escape from the world around him, and in the recent months we have been shown just how much we depend on one another and how extraordinarily complex our world is – we are connected to one another globally as well as locally. The international system can easily be disrupted when we least expect it, but perhaps the lockdown has taught us something which can point us back to the early church and to the vision of holding all things in common.

That simple description from Acts of the common life can still be a vision: for a start it reminds us that nothing is truly ours; everything I have is ultimately accountable to God, and it is also part of the common property of all people – in the sense that we are all part of one world, sharing its resources. And if that is the case then we all have a responsibility to ensure that the world reflects God's justice. Of course anything we do will be compromised and in the scheme of things it may not look like very much – but still there is a vision: co-operation not competition, fellowship not individualism, sharing not possessiveness; and those values seem to be returning, at least in part as we recognise how much we depend on those who are often not well paid and taken for granted. We can hope and pray that something of that will continue when things eventually return to normal.

Those are the principles that Luke stresses in the Acts of the Apostles and those are the principles that each of us has a responsibility to re-create in whatever ways we can – and it ought to affect how we relate to one another and to the society around us. Of course we are unlikely to change the world – but then the early church didn't suddenly change the world either.

But the early church did show the world what a changed world could be like: 'All who believed were together and had all things in common; day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and

generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people'. That vision transformed the world and inspired generation upon generation. The world needs visions, and it is up to us to supply them. We may not be able to share bread today but we can share the vision so all can ultimately share in the gifts that God has given us and the whole world. Amen.