

## **SERMON FOR EASTER 4 | 7 May 2017**

**This week I had a visit from Liz Adekunle the new Archdeacon of Hackney. You may remember she preached for our 140th anniversary Mass in May last year so it was time for a bit of catching up.**

**With just an hour to bring her up to speed with what is happening here, it is inevitable that some things got lots of attention and some things were completely ignored. But what was obvious was that while we clearly come from very different church stables, we were/are committed to the same thing: drawing newcomers to faith. I say this, because I think she was genuinely surprised by what she found here. As a modern evangelical, I don't think she imagined that parishes with our theology were very interested in evangelism: it would seem that in her experience, catholic parishes are much more concerned with other things. One of the great joys of being an Anglican is to find that there is still more that unites us than divides us, even if our language and ways of going about things look and feel rather different. But more of that another day.**

**Because at this time of the year, we are given the opportunity to go right back to our Early Church roots with readings from one of my favourite books in the Bible, the Book of Acts. I love Acts. I love it because of the picture it paints of the key figures of the early church, especially saints Peter and Paul; I love the dynamism that flows through every page as the tiny Christian community are forced to live on their wits, persecuted yet always positive about their mission to share the Good News.**

**But most of all I love this passage from chapter 2 which gives us the benchmark for Christian living – not just in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine but for us now. It is only 5 verses long but in each of those there is something for us to ponder on, so here goes!**

**Like much of St Luke's writing (Luke wrote Acts as well as his Gospel) it is the small details that count. So he begins:**

*The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

**I don't know about you, but for me the word that stands out in that sentence is the verb, 'devoted'. 'Spent' would have done just as well but Luke uses the word, *devoted*; which feels utterly different. It is about time and about priorities. What did you do yesterday? Lots of things. But what took most of the time when you could choose what to do? Because that is likely to be the thing that most interests you, the thing that you are devoted to.**

**And for the Early Church in Acts 2, that was poring over the words and the works of Jesus – as recounted to them by James, Peter and John and the rest of the apostles. It was deeply fascinating - powerful enough to get them to leave others things aside so that they could concentrate on just that. So we might ask ourselves: when did a passage from the Bible grip us like that? What has changed in the years between AD30 and now, AD2017?**

*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

**So it wasn't just head stuff then? It wasn't just all talk. What the members of the little Church saw was enough to blow their minds away: they saw people's lives turned around and they saw what freedom for fear and true happiness looked like. Awe is a strong word: it is the effect of being stopped in your tracks. Wow, we say when we see something stunning – from a fantastic landscape to a truly overwhelming building. When we are 'awe-struck' we are reacting to something that is bigger than us and we are genuinely overcome. The third verse:**

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

**This is the line that makes me sit up every time I hear it. And right now, in the middle of yet another election and with Christian Aid Week a week away, they have even more impact. Here in the Bible we have a community, a real community just like ours, full of both rich and poor. And they knew that if their faith in Jesus was to mean anything, they had to take a very different attitude to the things that they owned. *What is mine is also yours; what I don't need you can have. In fact your need may be greater than mine in which case you can have it anyway.***

**The Good Samaritan, the story of the rich man with the beggar at the gate: these aren't just stories for Sunday School they are the radical bottom line for every adult Christian.**

**And, in this election season, it is played out in discussions about income tax and National Insurance; it is played out in industrial investment policies and discussions about NHS spending. But it is also played out in the care we have for those in our daily lives who have no hope of being able to pay us back; it is played out in the money we send to Zimbabwe or wherever our charitable focus is this week. It is played out in the care for the sick and for the elderly...   **Number 4:****

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.

**Talking to my Jewish dentist on Thursday I remarked how much better the Jewish community were at passing on their traditions to their children than we are. Smiling he said simply: *that's because it is all to do with food!* And he is right – and Jesus was right: breaking bread was to be at the heart of every Christian life: *do this in remembrance of me*. But that requires us to be together, and it requires us to be calling to mind all the reasons we have to be grateful and to be thankful. Is it too much to leave what else we are doing for a short time to 'break bread' at Mass and say thank-you? And finally:**

And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**Which is hardly surprising, is it?! There is nothing more attractive than upbeat generosity. Why did the Early Church grow so amazingly? Because people were attracted to the first disciples because of their openness and kindness. We can preach all the right words and provide all the right answers, but unless it is borne along by a tide of not caring whether we are being taken for a ride or not, then none of the rest will make any sense at all.**

**Five verses. Five verses which say it all.**

**Five verses which turn Jesus from being another teacher and social scientist into the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for his sheep – and invites us to do the same.**