

Easter in practice

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

We are on the other side of Easter. Holy Week and the Vigil is over. The resurrection has become the new reality in all of its glory and mystery, the focus In the Book of Acts is on the emergence of the early Church, and the time when the followers of Jesus put their money where their mouths were. Literally.

We see something we can recognise as the primitive Church working out what being a Christian was going to be about. They weren't simply going to talk about their faith, though that was important, and remains important, they were going to do something about it. They believed firmly, and spoke about it with confidence, that Jesus rising from the dead had changed, had shifted something in their lives, and that things were going to be different. Maybe in big ways, maybe in small ways, but there was no going back. They had heard and seen too much about whatever resurrection was.

It was time to put Easter into practice.

After our exuberant celebrations last Sunday with floral and choral decoration, does it seem to you a bit of a comedown that our Bible reading from Acts reverts to the rather mundane issues of possessions, money, the sale of property and how to get things done within the church on the Low Sunday after Easter? But in Luke's mind everything here follows on from Easter. It is fundamentally connected to the apostles' preaching about Jesus' resurrection. The impact of the resurrection, the change that it made in those frightened followers of Jesus, made possible true generosity and bold living.

There is no point in 'believing in Easter' unless you are willing to put into practice what Easter is about. It's about serving your community – the Church and the wider community. It is doing what you can to help people in need, whether that need is physical, emotional, or spiritual. It is about sharing your time and your talents and your money because you know this is going to make a difference to make the world a better place. Easter isn't simply about feeling good, or even believing good, on their own. It is about doing good and being good.

It's always going to be a challenge. Everyone is looking out for the Christian to fail and to fall. James Baldwin the American writer and civil rights activist said: "I can't believe what you say because I see what you do." That's fighting talk to a person of faith whenever they say believe. It doesn't damn us to hell because we have tried and failed: we always try, and we sometimes fail. But it does give us pause for thought, and make us ask ourselves, if we say we are believers, or are trying to be believers, "How am I doing?" Or, as a church, "How are we doing?"

"When you think about it, the quality of the church's life together is evidence for the truthfulness of the resurrection. The most eloquent testimony to the reality of the resurrection is not an empty tomb or a well-orchestrated (service) on Easter Sunday, (important though these are), but rather a group of people whose life together is so radically different, so completely changed from the way the world builds a community, that there can be no explanation other than that something decisive has happened in history. The tough task of interpreting the reality of a truth like the resurrection is not so much the scientific or historical – 'How could a thing like that happen?' but the church and community question, "Why don't you people look more resurrected?"

Here might be what we argue in our defence: "But there's horror in Gaza. But the war drags on in Ukraine. But our leaders don't lead. But there are earthquakes in Taiwan and New York. But it's been raining. Forever."

God isn't requiring fair-weather Christians. God is hoping for all-weather Christians. I suspect God is also not put off by Christians who know they don't get it right all of the time.

We read that passage by Luke in Acts about the early Church and their 'being of one heart and soul.' We are accustomed to hearing this gold-standard piety. But we shift a little uneasily when we read further: how they handled their finances and property. They shared what they had. How could that be? Karl Marx claimed that nearly every human attitude and action could be traced to economic sources. Luke wasn't a Marxist, but he was enough of a realist to know that there is a good chance that where our possessions are our hearts will be also. It is why Luke writes a surprisingly large amount about economic issues and money, and how we handle them.

Our faith isn't about money, but it is about how we use our money, for ourselves, for charities, for the Church. Show me what you spend your money on, and I will tell you what you believe in, goes the old saying. It is salutary, then, to see what those early Christians, with differing financial and property resources, spent their money on: trying to help others. We have this tiny little Bible summary of how God would like the world to be. People looking out for each other, people caring, people listening, people sometimes making sacrifices, people looking at a bigger picture. When we put Easter into practice, there's a good chance we *will* look more resurrected.

How they went about their lives of faith, and they didn't always get it right in the early church, was also because they were of, 'one heart and soul.' I have a strong feeling that there were differences, and tensions, and some wanting to do some things one way, and others wanting to do things another way. Their working through what they wanted to do, and how they wanted to do it was a process, it had to be worked out. But because they were of, 'one heart and soul', on many occasions, they got it right. By believing the right thing, thinking the right thing, saying the right thing, God's Spirit led them to do the right thing.

That doesn't just work for Church things. It works for family things. And political things. And economic things. And business things. And things that involve what we learn; and things that involve how we relate to people and the world around us. Doing the right thing is not always about getting your own way. In fact, I suspect it rarely is. Doing the right thing is about looking to see where the consensus might be. What is not only desirable but what is possible and what is going to be sustainable.

In a democracy, in a time of impending election, not everyone will agree. The current fracture in our political world isn't simply down to ineptitude or general bad-ness (though there is some of that around). I wonder if it might not be that at the moment people have run out of steam. They don't quite know what they want, or if they do know, they don't know how it is going to be done. I'm not talking about the knee-jerk reactions, or entrenched positions that we hear about from the extremes on left and right. I'm talking about the broad centre of our nation. What do we really want for our country? How are we going to achieve it? How are we going to do it together, for each other, and for ourselves? We may not have all the answers, but we will have some. Being of 'one heart and soul'? How do we resolve the aching needs of our health service, our education, or our arts world, our transport, our waterways that are not deplorably polluted? Are these things beyond us to resolve? But what if: 'One heart and soul'; Putting Easter into practice?

Nobody is saying it's going to be easy, or even all achievable in one go. But those first Christians, weeks after Easter, looked inward to what they had, and what they were, and then looked outward to the needs that they saw, and where they thought, "We could make a difference there. We could be the ones to share. We could be the ones to listen. We could be the ones to include. We could be the ones to help." Not the whole Kingdom of God in one go, but enough of a glimmer to show there are times it can be done, because it needs to be done.

It works for the Church too. In this time of change, what are we about in this season of Easter. Everyone pulling their weight and contributing? Everyone looking around to see what can be done because it needs to be done?

The American academic George Dewey Carter said some years ago: *"It is not enough to profess, We have to practise. It is not enough to talk, We have to do. It is not enough to promise, We have to embody the promise. It is not enough to say, "Isn't it awful." We have to get close enough to get hurt."*

Looking at their world, I have a feeling that's what those first Christians did. "There was not a needy person among them" Because they put Easter into practice.

Looking at His world, I think that's what Jesus continues to do, through people like you, and me.

Putting Easter into practice.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen