

Today in the second in our sermon series on the church, the Body of Christ, and today's subject is Fellowship. We're looking at the two passages in Acts which Caroline read for us.

There are times in our life when good things happen which delight us and fill us with joy, like passing an exam, getting a job offer or promotion, a marriage proposal, a family wedding, a birth, celebrating a family member's success. Group things for those with a shared interest like their team winning and I imagine there are some pretty happy Welsh rugby supporters and probably some sore heads this morning. National things like VE day marking the end of the Second World War and I can picture the well-known photographs taken in London, for example. The successful 2012 London Olympics which lifted everybody's spirits. I'm sure there will be huge celebrations when this pandemic is over. I've warned my family that I shall be looking to catch up on over a year's worth of missed hugs. But all these things cannot, I'm sure, match the euphoria experienced by the disciples in the early church described in the beginning of Acts – euphoria that would last a lifetime and would change lives – euphoria that made them quite unable to be quiet about what they'd personally witnessed in the resurrected Jesus. Everything Jesus taught them, told them and hinted at now made sense. What Jesus said would happen had come true.

You can imagine the disciples' deep despair seeing their inspirational and charismatic leader, their hope, arrested, tried and put to death on a cross. They must have thought it was all over – their world had imploded, their hopes dashed. They were terrified at the possibility of being recognised as

associates of Jesus and fled for their safety. Peter, you will remember, denied knowing Jesus, as Jesus said he would, and was completely devastated afterwards. Their leader had gone – so they thought – and their world had collapsed. They were in the depths of despair. And then, on the morning of the third day the women, the first witnesses, go to anoint Jesus' body and find an empty tomb. Where was Jesus? Could the unthinkable have happened? That day Cleopas and his companion are on the road to Emmaus when they're joined by a stranger who they ultimately recognise as Jesus. They rush back to Jerusalem with their amazing news. You can imagine the rumours beginning to circulate – the jungle drums were beating. The appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples – the walking, talking, eating, drinking, physically present Jesus, convinced them of the truth of the resurrection. From the deepest gloom to the height of euphoria – everything has changed. And it is this complete transformation in the disciples' demeanour that is, for me, compulsive evidence of the truth of the Resurrection. And the way they resolutely refuse to be silenced or swayed from what they know to be true, despite threats and persecution, even death.

Nothing will silence the disciples and those joining them in the early church – nothing can dampen their excitement, their euphoria, their sheer joy bubbling over, their compulsion to share the good news, the life-changing news that is Jesus.

The two passages we're looking at this morning from Acts 2 and Acts 4 knit well together because they have a similar theme but it might be helpful to

understand the background in which they are set and, in fact, quite a lot happens in the interim.

At the beginning of Acts, at Jesus' Ascension, he told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Holy Spirit enabling them to be his witnesses throughout the world and that duly happened at Pentecost. Inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter gave his testimony, his impassioned witness statement as to the identity of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection is the fulfilment of promises made by God through King David and this heir of David's has been raised from the dead. In other words Jesus is the rightful king of Israel – his resurrection the sure and certain sign that he is the Messiah, for whom Israel has been waiting. The people were "cut to the heart", in other words they were mortified at their previous rejection of Jesus and acknowledged their belief in him. They repented and were baptised.

They met daily in public, in the temple courts, under the noses of the Jewish authorities. Chapter 2 verse 42: They **devoted** themselves to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer – in other words the four essential ingredients for a balanced, fruitful Christian life – all equally important.

And note the word "devoted". This isn't half hearted. It's single-minded, whole-hearted and complete commitment to this new way of life, rooted in their love for Jesus and for each other. Devoted – dedicated – both words come from the same root but the word devoted implies the inclusion of emotion - of love. Love that compelled God, the God of love, to send

Jesus to live among us and save us through his death on the cross – love and compassion that flowed out from Jesus – love that drew these first disciples together and kept them together - love that kept them united – love that compelled and committed them to share everything they had like one big family.

They sold their possessions so they could give to people in need – they didn't sell the roofs over their heads but things they didn't need – note the word is need, not want or fancy. This way of life – this demonstration of love and joy was powerful and attractive. People were drawn to them and joined them. This euphoria, this joy, this good news, was catching. The church was born – and it was growing fast.

Filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered with God's authority they were enabled to perform wonders and miraculous signs. And, as we read on from the end of Chapter 2, Peter healed a crippled beggar and preached powerfully, rustling the feathers of the Jewish authorities, the Sanhedrin, who had condemned Jesus and were keeping a watchful eye on his followers. Peter and his companion John were teaching and proclaiming Jesus' resurrection – they were living dangerously. And so it proved because they were arrested, put into jail and brought before the Sanhedrin who asked them by what power or what name did they speak? Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke up. They had healed the man in the name of Jesus – the cornerstone they had rejected in whom only Salvation could be found. The Sanhedrin were at a loss as to what to do and were astonished at Peter and John's courage, these two ordinary, uneducated men who spoke so powerfully with such eloquence and had performed a

healing, witnessed by many. They commanded Peter and John to speak and teach no more in the name of Jesus but they replied that they could not keep quiet about what they had witnessed. Should they obey God, they asked, or the Sanhedrin?

Peter and John returned back to their people and told them what had happened. And now we come to our second passage In Acts 4. They prayed that, despite the threats, they would be empowered to speak and heal, perform wonders in Jesus' name and speak powerfully of the truth without fear. The place was shaken, a sign that their prayers had been heard. God's grace was upon them, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to preach despite the Sanhedrin's warning.

And then we read that, despite the threats and warnings, nothing has changed. The believers, the early church, were completely united, of one mind, sharing their possessions, blessing and loving those who had need. Does this concept of sharing, of pooling resources, owning everything in common strike us as cosy, as theoretical but impractical, or just plain terrifying! I suspect in our culture and in our affluent corner of leafy Surrey we find it terrifying!

In Tom Wright's commentary he points out that the early Christians weren't the first Jews to try communal living. Apparently, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, there's a description of a covenant community formed around a character called "the Teacher of Righteousness", probably in the first century BC or a bit earlier. This teacher claimed that through his work God has established the new covenant, spoken of by the prophets, particularly Jeremiah and

Ezekiel, and he was critical of the priestly hierarchy of the time, based in the Temple. This community saw themselves as the one in which the ancient ideal of Israel as God's covenant people was coming true, so they shared their possessions. In Deuteronomy 15 is the command of remission of debts every seven years and goes on in verse 4 "there will be no needy person among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." Tom Wright makes the point that Luke was making the controversial claim that God has established the new Covenant people through Jesus, in whom God's promises were coming true.

Luke is making the claim that the early Christian movement was, in effect, the true covenant community that God had always intended to establish, achieved by the total forgiveness of sins and payment of debts accomplished by Jesus on the cross. So these early Christians were demonstrating the implied promise of covenant renewal, forgiving debts and sharing everything in common.

I think these early Christians were exhibiting the depth of their faith. They had nothing to fear. They knew that their future, their security, lay in Jesus alone, not in the acquisition of personal wealth and material possessions.

I mentioned earlier the euphoria, the joy, that drew people in their droves to join the movement we now call the church. I don't think the church today is seen in quite the same way – more's the pity! Wouldn't it be great if we could encapsulate and emulate their powerful example, their passionate

witness, the all-encompassing love and joy they shared. The good news they were bubbling over to share is ours to share too.

I am aware and very grateful for the efforts the community at St Mary's is making to reach out, love and bless our community. For example the initiative we call LoveFetcham springs to mind, as does The Greenhouse project and the recent Heart trail, all underpinned with prayer as we try and join in God's mission to reach out with love into our community.

I spoke earlier of the word devoted which reminds me of the song Olivia Newton-John, sings in Grease, "Hopelessly Devoted to You", which is about unrequited love. I think this is maybe a song that God could sing to us. Much as he loves us and demonstrates that love in sending Jesus to us, unfortunately most of us don't reciprocate that love in the same way.

I'm going to finish by quoting some of the words of one of my absolute favourites which say it all:

How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That he should give His only Son
To make a wretch his treasure.
I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and Resurrection.

Amen.