

## Family Service – Granborough, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2024

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter – low Sunday

By Peter Evans

---

#### Meeting the needs of others

This morning, we are taking a slightly different approach to our service. We are going to look (briefly) at all the set readings for the day. So more of a taster menu than a main meal.

Our first reading is:

#### **Psalm 133**

A song of ascents. Of David.

- 1 *How good and pleasant it is  
when God's people live together in unity!*
- 2 *It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron's beard,  
down on the collar of his robe.*
- 3 *It is as if the dew of Hermon  
were falling on Mount Zion.  
For there the Lord bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore.*

I always think this sounds very messy, with oil pouring down all over the place. I can't help but think how difficult Aaron's robe will be to clean afterwards. This is one of those Psalms that is easier to understand if we paraphrase it.

*God loves it when we live together in unity, it really does bring Him joy  
It is like strawberries and cream, or the finest of chocolates.  
It's like that glorious view that lifts the soul.  
Because when we are as one people, then God's blessings pour forth.*

It is simply saying that God loves it when we are united, when we are of one heart and mind. It brings God great pleasure and his blessings pour forth.

Our second reading is from the first epistle of John. In our service, we looked at this just before our repentance.

#### **1 John 1: v1 – 2: v2**

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*

None of us are perfect, we know that, sometimes all too acutely. But there can still be a tendency to think that deep down, we are basically, good people. That's certainly what the world around us says to itself. "I lead a good life" is a common comment that people make when we talk about God and church.

But our God is a holy God. And he wants us to be holy – anything less than holy is not good enough. This is the sinfulness to which the bible refers. We fall short of God's holiness and as such, we are sinful. And as the reading from 1 John says, if we say that we have not sinned, then we are kidding ourselves.

We cannot walk in darkness and claim to be in fellowship with God. We must walk in the light, and to walk in the light, we must be forgiven.

Our third reading comes from.....

### **John 20:19-31**

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

*19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

*21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

I love this reading because of verse 22. Jesus breathes on the disciples and says receive the Holy Spirit. It reminds me of a verse from right near the beginning of the bible. It's not a set reading for this Sunday, but it does link in closely.

### **Genesis 2: 7**

*Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

At both our time of creation and at the time of our restoration through the resurrection of Jesus, God breathes on us. But the words used for breathing are not

the same, not just because Genesis was written in Hebrew and Jesus spoke in Aramaic and was written down in Greek. In Genesis, God breathes with power – it is breath that creates. And in John's gospel, Jesus breathes to fill us. To fill us with the Holy Spirit. This is a like a downpayment before the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Our fourth reading comes from Acts, just a few chapters in, and crucially, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

**Acts 4: 32 – 35**

The believers share their possessions

*All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.*

We've just read about how the early church shared everything. So, here's a random question. Would you share your teddy bear? Even though, logically, it's just a toy, our teddy bears almost always mean so much more to us than that. They are our friend, our comforter, or confident, nice to hug, never answer back, and the worst that can happen is that they become a bit threadbare over the years. Unless you lose him of course. Or your sister steals it. And won't give it back. Even though she has two!

I'm not bitter. Honestly. Even though I've had to borrow one of Ben's this morning.

Teddy bears are generally, not for sharing. They become very personal to us. And certainly, when we are young children, almost part of us. I loved my teddy bear. Even after my sister stole it! Full details of the family feud available on request.

And here's an amazing thing. I had not explicitly asked people to bring along their Teddy Bears, but word must have got out. Because church was full of teddy bears. And they all had a story to tell. Bears given in love in special occasions, bears who'd had a long and hard life. Bears that had been on TV. Or lost, countless times. And then found again. I was genuinely quite surprised, and it shows how much we love our teddy bears.

Some may share teddy bears, but we all know, they are hard to share. Which brings us to the slightly wider question – what things would we share, if at all?

I was once having a chat with a Christian friend about sharing - it was one of those serious, heavy discussions. And he said he would share anything with anyone in need. Me, being the argumentative sort, started to list some of his stuff, and sure enough, we quickly got to something that he agreed he wouldn't share. It was just too valuable to him personally to want to risk it getting damaged or lost. That's no criticism of my friend, it just shows that we all have our limits.

So, sharing is where we start with this insight into the early church.

But I want to give you an example of where it might go too far.

So for example, would you share your toothbrush? I know someone who quite happily picks up the nearest toothbrush available, whether it's hers or not. It's just sheer pragmatism. The nearest to hand will do.

And it's a high risk strategy if you ask me. What happens if it's the one used to clean around the toilet hinges? Don't ask.

But that's who she is. If it's there, use it. And not just toothbrushes – she actually has quite a long list of interchangeable stuff.

Which brings us to the passage from Acts which describes the early church. They shared, big time. Everything they owned was held in common. No one was ever in need and they gave generously.

From where we are today, at a distance of 2000 years or so, the early church years covers quite a spectrum. So to be specific, this is the very early church. The passage in Acts 4 describes the early church in around AD 33 or AD 34.

It is quite literally, just a few months old. In the space of a short time, Jesus has been crucified, has risen from the dead, appeared to the disciples, has ascended in to heaven, and the Holy Spirit has been poured out at Pentecost.

And St Paul isn't a Saint yet – he is still Saul of Tarsus. And working for the other side. So this very early church doesn't even have any of his epistles. Acts of the Apostles are being experienced in real time and the gospels have not yet been written. They just have the old testament scriptures and eye witness accounts. But they do have the Holy Spirit.

In our readings, we see the early church in three contexts.

In John 20, they are locked in the upper room, not knowing whether it even has any feet to find. They are very unsure of themselves. And it was right after this passage that Thomas utters his famous words "I won't believe unless I see for myself". It's almost a head in the sand moment for the early church.

Then in Acts 4, this early church is starting to find its feet. The Holy Spirit has come and their world has changed. A sense of purpose and even excitement is starting to appear. But it is still early days. It is a few years and 5 chapters before Saul of Tarsus finds faith in Jesus and becomes St Paul. The same St Paul who went on to take the good news into Asia Minor (now Turkey) and beyond, establishing a string of churches as he did so. And it is around 60 years before John's first epistle appears – that's the passage that we read earlier about needing to be forgiven.

So I want you to imagine a church that is few in number. Is in a certainly indifferent and potentially hostile society. A church where teaching on what it is to be a Christian and what that means is not consistent, with different views vying for pole position. A church where there is a lot of uncertainty about what the future will hold.

This is this very early church in Jerusalem.

But it could also apply to the church in the UK today.

We sometimes feel we are few in number, that those around us are often indifferent, and occasionally hostile. What it is to be a Christian is not always clear – we only have to look at the debates in general synod and the national press to see this. And yet, just as the early church in Jerusalem had received the Holy Spirit, so can we.

There are three things that stand out for me from this passage.

- 1) They seem very upbeat. There seems to be an air of optimism, which we don't always have in the church today. In fact, there's almost a party mood – they seem excited.
- 2) They are united. This is another strawberries and cream moment. Our first reading From Psalm 133 talked about how pleased God is when we are united. One in heart and mind. This is such a good way to describe being united. Of course, it doesn't mean that we agree on everything. Different views are inevitable – if I'm honest, I think the only person that agrees with me on everything is me. Apart from Teddy of course.
- 3) They shared. We are only four chapters into the book of Acts, which covers all the heavy duty stuff – the ascension, Pentecost, the cure of the lame man, the trial before the Sanhedrin, but it also manages to fit in two sections on how the early Christian community lived. They gave, they shared and they looked after each other's needs.

In one sense this is what you would expect. At the Passover meal, the night before Jesus dies, Jesus tells his disciples:

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

But we know this is easier said than done. Yet this is how the early church was behaving. It is a big deal and it applies equally to us. Its practical outworking might be a little different, but the principle is the same. Meet one another's needs. Take care of one another. And by this will the world around us know that we are followers of Jesus.

And there is a fourth aspect that stands out from the passage. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. They had been doing this in all of the earlier chapters. With conviction. This is what was causing the church to grow. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they shared the gospel with anyone who would listen. This was not an inward looking church. It was a church that knew it had a message to spread. After all, Jesus says more than once that our calling is to make disciples of all nations.

Acts of the Apostles is not just a history of the early church. It is a history of the spiritual energy unleashed by the Holy Spirit. His power, His presence among the early Christians spreads the church across the known world at a phenomenal rate. Some say it would be better titled Acts of the Holy Spirit. And this is our inheritance.

Earlier on, I drew a parallel between us here in our villages and the very early church in Jerusalem. Sometimes we may feel that the task in front of us is too daunting, that we get bogged down in day to day stuff. That it's easier to be inward looking than it is to take the gospel to the world around us.

And it would have been easy to think the same in the early church. Jesus' ministry had come to an abrupt end. He had not freed Israel from Roman rule (not that he was ever going to do that). The world was at best not interested, or worse, was actively against them.

Yet, they knew that Jesus had risen from the dead. They had either seen him themselves or trusted those who had told them. They had seen the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost. And so, they were expectant. Hopeful, excited even. Excited about their faith and excited about sharing it. They knew God's love in their hearts and showed it to one another. This early church went on to change the world.

And it can be the same for us.

To be clear, this talk is not about whipping up enthusiasm for something where the will isn't really there. It's about letting God pour his Holy Spirit into our lives and fill them with His love. The rest just follows on from there.

Would I share my teddy bear? Do you know, I think I probably would.

Amen