

Acts 2.42-47; 1 Peter 2.19-25; John 10.1-10

In these post-Easter weeks, the lectionary gives us readings from Acts, where we hear about the emergence of the early church, how people were being converted in huge numbers, and Christianity was beginning to develop as a new and fervent religion. The early church, from what we know of it, is a curious and impressive thing. There is a lot going on under the surface. It is blossoming in the melting pot context of the Roman empire, and a plethora of cultures, as people travelled and talked and spread the message about Jesus. It is, of course, steeped in Judaism, bringing with it questions about theology, scripture, purity, the law, Gentiles, the cosmos, and God. And yet, the writer of Acts uses this curious phrase: 'all who believed were together and had all things in common'. All things in common. Really? Obviously this can't mean literally all things. The new Christians were still people with their own personalities, upbringings, from different locations and of differing class or education levels and employments. They were also a mixture of ages, and were a group made up of both men and women. So how are they able to be described as a group who had all things in common?

When Lewis and I moved to Charlotte last year, one of the things we liked to do was walk along the rail trail to South End, and it struck both of us how alike everyone seemed. In that part of town, it seemed obligatory that everyone be in their 20s, worked for a bank, wore a similar outfit, and you either ran or walked a dog down the trail. Obviously, not all the young people in South End are clones, but it felt more homogenous than we were used to, so it stood out to us. One could say that everyone we saw appeared to have all things in common...

So with the early church, we are told a few key facts. We are told that they: would sell their possessions and goods, distribute the proceeds to all, spend loads of time together in the temple, break bread, and have glad and generous hearts. It's clear that there was some major key that was binding them all together, and driving them with a common purpose, so that to the onlooker, all these people seemed to be aligned. The common thread, of course, was their new faith. They were so full of joy in the resurrection, overflowing with knowledge that they were living for righteousness, free from sin and instead living in ways that emulated Jesus. They were entirely devoted to living with glad and generous hearts, because that was the gift of the resurrected Christ. The early church was made up of people who were all in, totally committed, wrapped up in awe and wonder. Being a Jesus follower was such a defining thing that it was all that anyone else saw. As a result, the early church was exploding in size, with more and more people joining them every week. They were together and had all things in common.

I wonder if people ever think that of us. I wonder if people come here and see that while we are a gathered family with all our differences and variety, we are also bound together by something greater, something that overarches everything else. I wonder if people look at us and see the joy of the resurrection, a church delighting in each other and in God.

Our readings today use a lot of shepherd imagery. In the Church of England, this week is even referred to as 'Good Shepherd Sunday', with the use of the 23rd psalm and the gospel where Jesus describes himself as the gate for the sheep. And I think the point of this analogy, as with all of Jesus' 'I AM' sayings, is that through the use of poetic imagery and parables, Jesus is spelling out again and again for his listeners that he is the key - that salvation, joy, safety, and a relationship to God, are all to be found through him.

It's always about Jesus. It's always about loving God and loving our neighbour as ourself. It's always about the resurrection, about sharing in the Eucharist together. It's about having all this in common, and our faith being the driving force that shapes our lives. It should be that when the outside observer arrives, they are struck by the fact that we are moulded by love and joy.

I love the last sentence of our gospel. Jesus says 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'. Not just life now, normal ordinary life. Not even just eternal life with God, which will be

amazing. But life in abundance. Life overflowing with zest, knowing ourselves called and created to be who we are, glorifying God with our entire beings. The abundance of knowing our good shepherd who cares for us, a life abounding in meaning and grace, starting in the here and now and continuing beyond death.

May we all have this in common, that we are filled with the Spirit, follow the voice of our good shepherd, and proclaim God's love to the world in word and action.

Amen.