

‘Too good to be true?’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 13th April 2008

In recent weeks, the first Scripture in our worship services has been from the second volume written by Luke, the Acts of the Apostles. In the last two weeks, we have heard extracts from the first sermon preached by Peter. Today’s extract described what happened as a result of Peter’s preaching. The six verses, which Anne/Beth read to us, give a particularly clear and concise description of the first Christian community, the first church we may say. They also hold a particular place in my heart because they constitute one of the Scripture passages I had to memorize when I was in my teens. I belonged to what was then called the Girls’ Life Brigade, now simply called the Girls’ Brigade, rather like the Girl Guides. I learned many useful things from belonging to the Girls Life Brigade, including how to tie a variety of knots and, rather more exciting to me, how to play the side-drum in a marching band. Once a month, we would process with our company-flag through the streets of our town. This led to a church service in which we paraded the flag. If I was carrying the flag I was always nervous about getting it stuck in the low ceiling at the point of entry to the sanctuary. But the drumming I loved. I still have a love of just about all types of drumming. As I was taking part in four concerts with the Florida West Coast Symphony Orchestra last week, I watched with awe and not a little envy the three members of the orchestra who were playing drums of various kinds in the big orchestral work the Key Chorale was singing with.

Better than tying knots and drumming was this learning of Scripture passages by heart. This was for taking the Scripture examination which was held annually in November. (I remember particularly arriving in the Church Hall to sit my examination on the evening of November 22 1963. This date may well ring a bell with you. As we all arrived for our examination, the news was just coming through that the President of the United States had been assassinated.) It was I believe that same year that I associate with our Scripture passage from Acts this morning. Many of you will, I know, have passages of Scripture learned long ago and which you will never forget. In 1963 the passage set for memorization in the exam was Acts 2:42-47, precisely the verses set for this morning’s service. Only I learned them from the translation called the New English Bible, which had been published only 2 years before and was becoming popular in Britain. Most of us probably have a particular affection for a version of the Bible, which gave us words with which we are most familiar or which first came alive for us. Allow me then to read to you again our first brief Scripture from this morning but this time from the New English Bible. Peter had preached and many people in the crowd at Jerusalem, gathered for the Jewish Pentecost, have been moved to ask what they should do. They then repent, are baptized in the name of the Jesus the Messiah, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us that this first mass conversion involved some three thousand people. Then comes this wonderful description of this first group of Christians: ‘They met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray. A sense of awe was everywhere, and many marvels and signs were brought about through the apostles. All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common: they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required. With one mind they kept up their daily attendance at the temple, and, breaking bread in private houses, shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised

God and enjoyed the favor of the whole people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving.'

Wow! How wonderful! But isn't this description of the early church just too good to be true? Especially the bit about 'enjoying the favor of the whole people'. Another translation of this line puts it: 'everyone liked them'. Have you ever known a group of 300, let alone 3000 that everyone liked? Have you ever heard of a church that no one has a bad word to say about? This leads us to wonder, doesn't it, about the accuracy of Luke's description. And yet, you may remember from 2 weeks back, I drew attention to Luke's painstaking efforts to get things right. Both in his account of the life of Jesus in his gospel and in his account of the life of the church in Acts of the Apostles, Luke wants to present the good news as authentically as possible. True, Luke wants to promote the church as Christ's apostles. But this does not mean that he overlooks the difficulties, the stresses, and the strains that occur wherever a diverse group of people seeks to work, witness, and worship together. If you read just a few chapters on, for instance, in Acts chapter 5, you will find two of these early believers pretending to be sharing their possessions with the community whilst in reality holding something back. Fake generosity is probably worse than no generosity at all. It's not just the money involved in this case. It's the betrayal of trust. If you cannot rely on the word of someone belonging to the same Christian community as yourself, on whose word can you rely? Rest assured, Luke knows that the early church will have warts on it. So he records them. If we should still be tempted to think of the earliest church communities as perfect, we need only turn to Paul's letters. He addresses so many problems that it could be argued that but for the warts on these churches Paul's letters would never have been written at all.

So what do we learn from this wonderful description in Acts chapter 2? We learn what the church is at its best. We learn what the church is meant to be. It all centers around four things. The church is engaged in four activities: telling, doing, celebrating, and praying. If the church, any church community, is not engaged in all four things, then whatever else it is it is not the church. This is not simply a matter of taste like what type of songs we sing in church, what style of preaching, or how long the prayers are and where precisely they come in the worship service. Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, tells us about these four things because they define what makes the church. Today they can remind us of what the church is for. So let's look at each of these four things and see why together they make an authentic Christian community and one which may attract others.

Firstly, there is the telling. This telling is not of any old story; it is the telling of the gospel. These first Christians come together to hear the apostles teach. They are teaching the faith that emerges from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not a matter of people who like the sound of their own voice or who have the gift of the gab. The first apostles are those who lived with Jesus, who made the commitment of following him. They are the ones who went through the shattering loss and bewilderment which descended on them when he was crucified and they are the ones who can testify to his resurrection. So in any church community there have to be those who are willing to study these traditions and to pass them on. I love the way in the United States that you have Sunday School Classes for adults. In the UK, at least in all the Churches that I knew, Sunday School was for children. But you've got it right here. Being schooled in the faith should be a lifelong thing. Each of us each week

should learn something new about Jesus and deepen our faith. In teaching and in preaching, this is what the church seeks to do. This is why we had the series of sermons on the Apostles' Creed. Hopefully, it helped anchor us in our faith and made it possible for us to make this creed our own. The church is a group of people united not by temperament, hobbies, or culture but by beliefs. To be faithful to its calling, it needs to be apostolic, in the sense of being based on the teaching and preaching of the first apostles and then on the later articulation of this as the church spread and developed. 'The church is not to drift from one momentary emotional outburst to the next, to resuscitate Pentecost on weekly basis; rather the church moves immediately to the task of teaching, keeping itself straight about what it is and what it is to be about.'¹ Now, as then, is a ripe time for telling this story. 'Today the narrative that makes the church is kept alive in confessional lore, catechisms, contemporary statements of faith, church-year lections, eucharistic prayers, ... and faithful preaching and teaching.'²

Secondly, there is the doing. The title that Luke gives to his second volume on the faith is significant, isn't it? He doesn't call it 'The talks of the Apostles' but 'The Acts of the Apostles'. 'As the Word of God is enfleshed, so the words of his followers are inseparable from their deeds.'³ The early church was quite radical in its sharing. And it is too easy for us at this point to switch off and say: well things are different today. Indeed, they are different and this church, like most others, does not have people sell their possessions and distribute to the whole, not so far as I know, anyway. And yet we do have to work out what Christian fellowship means. At the very least it has financial implications for each of us. It asks of each of us to take seriously our communal obligations and to work these out according to how we have been blessed and according to common decisions.

It also has implications for what we share of ourselves in other ways besides financial. A friend of ours in Britain was speaking to us on the phone last week. She has since December of last year lost two close friends through suicide. She was telling us about the huge support of the Methodist Church in Canterbury. Knowing this church and many of its members, I was not surprised to learn of the way in which it had truly been the body of Christ to her. But her daughter, apparently, had been surprised. As our friend Jill quoted her daughter Mel: 'I'd no idea the church was like that.' Fellowship is clearly not just something you have, like a warm glow. It is something you do. 'In Luke 19:8 a little man is confronted by the gospel and responds by parting with material goods ... Now, a whole community does the same. Furthermore, the spirituality described here is considerably more than some ethereal outburst. Everything they once held has been set free so that the word *koinonia* means something.'⁴ *Koinonia*, the Greek word for 'fellowship', is the deepest kind of 'support system' there is. In New Testament times, it meant that all those rejected and marginalized by ancient cultures – slaves, women, widows, orphans, the weak, the old, the sick, they dying, the unwanted infant-were welcomed into the circle of Christian inclusion. We have our counterparts today.'^{5,6}

¹ William H Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, 1988, Atlanta: John Knox Press, p 40

² Gabriel Fackre in *The Lectionary Commentary; The Old Testament and Acts*, edit Roger E Van Harn, 2001, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p 536

³ Ibid

⁴ Willimon, p 41

⁵ Fackre, p 538

⁶ Willimon p 41

Thirdly, there is the breaking of bread, or as the Greek specifically has it: ‘the breaking of the bread’ This phrase, you may be surprised to learn, occurs only twice in the New Testament, here and in Luke 24:35 as we heard it last week at the end of the Emmaus resurrection appearance: ‘Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.’ We know that the early Christian community shared fellowship meals, that is, they ate together as believers. This was obviously more than merely having their meals with one another. This eating together was an aspect of their common loyalty to Jesus Christ. Whether this involved what we know as the Eucharist or Lord’s supper is a matter of debate. Probably, Peter’s church of Luke’s day would not know our distinction between the church *merely* breaking bread and the church breaking bread as a sacramental religious activity.’ In good Jewish fashion, when the blessing is said at the table, the table becomes a holy place and eating together a sacred activity.’ For us too, it is probably both fellowship meals and the Lord’s Supper which are part of our sharing as believers. It is important too to remember that at the last supper, according to Luke 22:30, Jesus promised his followers that they would eat and drink at his table in his kingdom. Paul too in 1 Corinthians, from which we get the words for our Eucharistic liturgy, speaks of Holy Communion as a foretaste of the Messianic banquet. So today a vital part of what the church is about is anticipating the consummation of God’s purpose. We talk of celebrating the Eucharist or celebrating the Lord’s Supper. When we break the bread as believers we do indeed celebrate God’s reign in our lives now and hereafter. Our Holy Communion is not a gloomy remembrance but a celebration of Jesus giving his life for us.

Fourthly, there is praying. Perhaps this is the thing we most take for granted about the church. Of course, the early church prayed. Of course, our church prays. But notice the devotion of these first Christians. Like the other three activities in this summary of church life, prayer is taken very seriously. This first big Christian community, following Peter’s preaching at Pentecost, were all Jews. It is very probably, therefore, that they kept the Jewish hours of prayer. There were three of these. Indeed, there still are. I’ve just this past week received a letter from a Jewish friend of mine on London to whom I’d written on the loss of her husband, and, as she tells me of the first intense period of mourning in the Jewish faith, the letter is full of the Hebrew terms for the different prayer times. We are told in this morning’s Scripture also that these first Christians continued to attend the temple (2:46). ‘In the midst of all the newness, the community does not neglect the traditions of the ancestors, does not cease being devoutly Jewish.

In all these activities of teaching, fellowship and sharing, breaking of bread, and praying we see a well-rounded picture of the church, the marks of authentic embodiment of the Spirit in the community’s life, a canon for the measurement of the church’s activity today.’⁷ We have many different forms of prayer practiced by members of this church, both privately and communally. And how vital this is. If ever we forget think of ourselves as some sort of holy club, dictating the agenda for God, and doing it all in our own strength, then we cease to be the church. I love this period in the Christian Year when we build up to Pentecost. Perhaps it’s because my favorite color is red and again this year we’re asking that you consider wearing something red for Pentecost on May 11th. I hope when this day comes to say something more

⁷ Willimon p 42

about why I enjoy the Christian celebration of Pentecost. Meanwhile, let's just remind ourselves that without Pentecost all these four activities which make and define the church would not exist. We as First United Methodist Church of Palmetto would not exist.

Luke's little summary of the Christian community we've focused on this morning is an idealistic one, but not in the sense that it is too good to be true. It is a vision of what is possible through the transforming power of God's Spirit in the followers of the resurrected Christ. Too good to be true? If we think this of the church Luke describes perhaps this betrays our tendency to be cynical rather than Luke's tendency to exaggerate. If we think this of our own church then again it is we who are lacking. There are two Greek words for good. *Agathos* simply describes a thing as good. *Kalos* means that a thing not only is good but looks good: it has a winsome attractiveness about it. Real Christianity is a lovely thing. You probably know people who are good but their goodness has a streak of unlovely hardness about it. In the early Church there was a winsomeness about God's people. The telling, the doing, the celebrating, and the praying were all authentic activities of the Holy Spirit. So let us as God's people in our day and age witness to the truth of the gospel by the winsome goodness of how we tell our faith, share the common life, break bread together, and pray. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.