**27th August 2017**

**Acts 15**

The Great British Bake Off returns this week – but with new judges and a new Tv channel. Channel 4 captured the popular TV baking show and hope its fans will stay loyal and tune in. The viewing figures will be much scrutinized as to whether it was a success of a soggy bottom of a failure.

The Great British Bake Off had a great following and allowed people to relate and have conversation over their shared interest in the show and its contestants and judges. Many things in life allow us to strike up conversation with strangers and relate. Yet it would stretch it to say those conversations lead to deep and meaningful relationships and fellowship.

I read a report in the paper the other day that said there were more lonely people in their twenties than ever before. Despite being the generation that was connected through the internet and social media and online communities, there was a real isolation of twenty year olds from real community and lasting initiate relationships. They may belong to Gyms and health clubs, go to yoga or are part of sports clubs, but they don’t offer a deep friendship and an opportunity to make and keep friends.

This month and next we are looking at some of the exploits of the Early Church as recorded in the 13th to the 20th chapters of Acts. We trace the story of those pioneers of the Christian faith and will look at their exploits with a view to how they can inspire us in today’s church. As we look at these stories we will look at what habits or disciplines sustained and nurtured those saints of old.

Today’s habit is fellowship.

The Greek word translated as ‘fellowship’ in Acts 2 is koinonia. It is a word rich in depth, meaning and challenge. It points to a quality of relationship and activity which is so, so much deeper than the chit chat (maybe about the Great British Bake Off) over a tepid cup of tea and a soggy digestive that sadly passes for fellowship in many places.

Koinonia is profoundly practical and deeply relational. It expresses what disciples of Jesus share together, what we give as well as what we receive.

I had no experience of real fellowship until I went to University. In my hall of residence in week one I went along to the Christian fellowship. Immediately I found people with shared values and beliefs but more than that a depth of understanding and acceptance. In other friendship groups, there was always a sub text of whether you fitted in: did you have the right attitudes, the right look; the right clothes, or the right accessories. There was within this Christian fellowship an acceptance and a vulnerability that allowed of deep friendship and sharing. We had the time – and any meaningful fellowship will require the commitment of time and investment – but we were living in each other’s pockets for a year which was the unique experience of being in a University hall of residence. But we also lived with purpose and meaning: we had a shared faith and a Saviour who had a call on our lives. Thirty years on some of my closest friends come from those days of hall fellowship.

The koinonia in Acts is seen in the followers of Jesus eating, praying and sharing goods together. In short sharing, their lives with each other and the world around., in a prophetic symbol of the Kingdom of God. A powerful sign of a Spirit filled way of life that stands against the sinfulness of selfishness. A wonder of hope, reconciliation and generosity. A true community of belonging and service.

Such fellowship was a powerful engine of mission and discipleship in the first century and remains so today. Intentional Christian community makes a transforming difference. Intentional in the sense that you have an intention – the intention is to grow in relationship to Christ and in relationship to his followers.

What is incredible and what I have discovered is that you can go to most places on God’s earth and find a fellowship of Christian believers and be accepted and helped.

Jean Vanier founded the L’arche community to live out the Gospel and follow Jesus Christ closely. He created places of wholeness belonging and fellowship for those with a range of abilities and disabilities in particular those with significant mental health issues who felt excluded, worthless and unloved.

He said in words that could equally apply to our own Open Door Club, that:

*‘it is through everyday life in community and the love that must be incarnate in this, that people discover that they have value, that they are loved and so loveable. Each day brings me new lessons on how much Christian life must grow in commitment to life in community, and on how much life needs faith, the love and the presence of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit if it is to deepen.’*

You obviously don’t get that if you stay in and watch Netflix or check your Facebook posts.

Jean Vanier continues by saying ‘*contemporary society is the product of the disintegration of more or less natural or familial groupings. Towns are made up of neighbours who do not know each other. Human community is no longer found in the street or the neighbourhood. This state of things brings a loneliness which some people have difficulty in coping with.*

In our individualist and anxiety ridden society – close fellowship can offer a counter cultural lifestyle of hope and purpose to the lonely, through living more intentionally in community.

It will continue to be our intention to try and strengthen the bonds of fellowship in this church. Whether you take up these opportunities, whether it be church weekends and retreats, fellowship groups, Women’s Guild, pastoral meetings, worship, social evenings – is of course up to you. But we will continue to be intentional about fellowship.

But we also need to be realistic. There is a risk when exploring koinonia fellowship that you do so via a romantic lense seeing an ideal world of tranquillity and harmony. The reality is that real fellowship is messy. I’m always suspicious when people describe their church as warm and friendly. I think yeah right… you don’t really know each other, do you?

Fellowships are made up of people who bring their personalities and needs to a community. Some will jostle for space, for attention, for praise. Some want to be left alone, some want to be laughed with, to be special. Some are defensive. Some passive. Some sensitive. Some possessive. Some are inventive and creative, others can’t cope with new ideas and change but want routine and tradition. And so we will argue and find friction.

It is to the New Testament’s credit that they didn’t gloss over the fall outs and arguments that this close fellowship of the early church had.

In Acts 15 we get an insight into some of the issues they dealt with and the need for compromise -for any fellowship to work.

In this chapter one of the key issues of the early church is discussed, namely how Jewish a Christian should be? Should the increasing number of Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians be obliged to keep the Jewish rules, particularly the one about circumcision – which Jews took as a sign that you belonged to the people of God.

Peter explained how the Spirit inspired him to accept the first gentiles on the same footing as Jewish people. Paul and Barnabas were next to speak, giving an account of their successful missions among the Gentiles. Then we are told that James gave a summing up speech from the chair.

James is an interesting figure in that he was the brother of Jesus. If you read the gospel accounts you will know Jesus had a difficult relationship with the members of his own family. Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15 that Jesus specifically appeared after his resurrection to James, which must have convinced him that his elder brother wasn’t an idiot after all.

James is linked with the letter of James in the New testament and was speaking from the conservative side.

If you want to know more about his story and that of the other lesser known apostles – then I’ll be doing a Bible Class next month to look at the story of these characters in more depth.

Paul and Barnabas spoke from the liberal radical side and Peter represented the charismatic ‘follow the Spirit’ side, which as Paul once reminded him, involved a typical Peter approach – eating with Gentiles one minute and refusing to do so the next (Galatians 2.11).

A split at this point in the church’s history could have resulted in three or more denominations from the outset.

The line James took was compromise. He understood the Jewish attachment to the law – he shared it. He also could see how it stood as a barrier to peoples of other cultures coming to God. He proposed that the Gentiles kept very basic rules. They should behave responsibly in the matter of sexual relations and they should stick to kosher meat. There would be no obligation to be circumcised. He ends by saying the law of Moses has been preached in every synagogue: it’s as if he’s saying, ‘it’s Jesus who needs followers now!’

James probably saved the church at that time. Because he had the trust and confidence of those who were most attached to the old ways, he was able gently to lead them forward to a meeting point with those who were advocating new ways. He was the first great ecumenical – putting into practice his brother’s prayer ‘that they may be ONE’.

Those who take the line ‘no Surrender’ ‘No compromise’ when it comes to ecumenical negotiations should be directed to the example of James. The Christian church would never have survived without compromise. No one, just no one has all the truth – except God himself!

However, we should add the proviso, ‘as long as the compromise is not written on tablets of stone’. Then the compromise becomes another unbending truth, with its adherents ‘orthodox’ and its deviants ‘heretics’. The very acceptance of compromise in the first place should mean an acceptance that what is agreed upon is provisional. The very fact that the first Christians agreed to accept Gentiles without becoming Jews meant that the Jewish laws had already become provisional in Christian eyes. The Gentiles would not have been accepted without provisionality.

The agreement at the Jerusalem council made a holding together possible for the time being. It was a compromise to keep sticky Old testament Christians on board. It was they who were really out of step with the teaching of Jesus who Mark in his gospel said had abolished the food laws (Mark 7.14). and it can’t have been long before Gentiles went all the way and stopped being fussy about their food. Thanks (or otherwise) to Paul, the Gentile appreciation of sex as a leisure activity did receive a knock back blow and left the church with a big hangover headache. But Compromise saved the day though and kept the middle together. That is all compromise can do. It is an essential Christian exercise, but only if it is regarded as a staging post and not a destination.

Later Paul would return to Jerusalem and James was concerned about the reception he would get from the hardliners so he asked Paul to compromise and turn up at the synagogue and take part in just one little Jewish ceremony. A riot happened which eventually led to Paul’s arrest and his long road to Rome and execution.

Was it right for James to compromise on this occasion and wrong for Paul on another? The compromise James made was in the direction of the freedom and liberation Jesus came to bring, whereas the compromise Paul agreed to was in the direction of the bondage Jesus came to destroy. There is never any pleasing of the old guard. Even James could not do it.

People are people. Some will always think they are right, they have the absolute truth, no compromise is possible. If you try and compromise with such people you make a move towards them and they step back so that you will have to move further until you get to the point where you surrender your freedom for their bondage. Psychologically they are desperate to be the only ones who are right. That will not work if you agree with them!

Read the letters of Paul and you will see how he felt persecuted by the worthier than thou brigade. Poor James meant well. He tried to please his right wing, people to whom he had some affinity. Instead his bright idea of having Paul speak to them led to Paul’s arrest and ultimately his trial and death. Yet his time under arrest led Paul to write the letters in which the message of Christian freedom from the bondage of the law was preserved and handed on to future generations, so the Holy Spirit has ways of getting around the fundamentalists, the righteous ones who believe they only have the truth.

It’s wherever any basis, however orthodox or biblical, is adopted as immoveable and stands in place of and is more important than the love of God shown in Jesus that you are likely to find schism. That is the sad reality of fellowship in the church.

We can of course see this dynamic played out in personal relationships as well. They say marriage is the art of compromise: two people often agreeing to disagree on many maters. Sometimes one partner will press in forcefully their way, their view and trouble may result in all sorts of ways.

At the end of this chapter Paul has another argument: this time with his partner Barnabas. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them on their next missionary journey but Paul didn’t think it was wise as John Mark deserted them on another trip. They have a sharp disagreement and go separate ways. They fell out. But later we know that John Mark does turn up in Rome and assists Paul so at some point they do have a reconciliation and Paul starts to appreciate John Mark’s qualities. Fellowship broken is restored which is a witness to the gospel. We remind ourselves that the gospel, the good news -, is about reconciliation: bringing together humanity and our creator; overcoming the enmity and rebellion and making enemies into friends.

Fellowship is a glorious and fragile thing. Compromise is always needed to pour oil on troubled waters and ease the cogs of community. Yet deep down we have a need to belong – to be valued, to contribute. The early church found this an important Holy habit and we do to. May God continue to unite us in Jesus Christ through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

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