

Matthew's weekly musing
9th April 2021
Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I've always found the end of Acts chapter 4 difficult. Listening to a sermon two years ago, I wanted to pull my hair out in frustration (but resisted because too much of it had departed unassisted).

The preacher was asserting that the passage gives the basis for church life. I have taken until now to work out why I was troubled. He was saying that what was going on then ought to be going on now. i.e. holding property in common (try saying that at a Conservative party conference!), and distributing goods for those in need (try saying that at a Republican Party Convention!).

Actually, what was going on in Jerusalem was an excited, exuberant determination by a group of pilgrims to stay together as long as possible before travelling home to Italy, Libya, Greece, Egypt, Turkey or even Iraq. It was one group from diverse places discovering unity. It wasn't a model church congregation showing us how to be church somewhere in Hampshire.

Here's the passage the preacher was using as the basis for his assertion:

Acts 4

32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This is a description of the first ever gathering of Christians.

There was something very special going on. There was a real buzz of excitement and expectation in the air, and everyone was astonishingly mutually supportive (v.32), and the disciples were clearly preaching brilliantly (v.33).

For me the key to receiving this passage is to notice that all those present were pilgrims. They were temporarily together and temporarily in Jerusalem. I once read that the population more than tripled at Passover time. There were also many extra traders in the city making their annual commercial profit supporting the pilgrims. It was a good opportunity to make a profit for the next year!

All these pilgrims and traders were caught up in the buzz about this crucified guy having come back to life. They were listening to the disciples teaching on why the crucifixion had happened and, no doubt, were captivated by all the stories of Jesus's ministry over the previous three years.

I put myself in the place of someone from north Africa, or Italy, or Turkey, or Egypt or Iraq – and I was listening to the accounts of Jesus healing, and feeding five thousand people, and calming the sea, and freeing the possessed. How exciting! I then imagined hearing about the God who loves people, and about Jesus who had said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." I wanted to hear more and more.

Best of all, if I had come from one of the other countries, I would have been afraid of the gods; I would have been offering sacrifices to try and please the gods. But when I learned that Jesus had made the final sacrifice, I would have discovered an amazing spiritual release and freedom.

I would certainly have wanted to learn more. I would have wanted time to stay on and recalibrate my belief system. I would have wanted to learn how to pray to the Father and the Son. I would have wanted more of the Holy Spirit.

So of course I would have used my trading profits to stay on and help others to stay on! Of course, as a citizen of Jerusalem or nearby, I would have sold property to enable these pilgrims and traders to stay on. I would have been totally caught up in the beginning of Christianity!

Perhaps, though, I was being tough on the preacher two years ago. There are insights in the passage about what it is to be a Christian. I enjoy getting together in fellowship as those first Christians did. I value deepening my faith by bible study - that is the nearest I can get to listening to the disciples. I am also pleased to share of my own wealth, whether meagre or privileged, with Christians and those in need.

This is the route to the end of verse 33 "And great grace was on them all."