

GLAD AND GENEROUS HEARTS

A Sermon for the fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops

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I was always told that politics and religion don't mix. I have spent most of my adult life proving that wrong. For me at least, politics understood as faith-in-action have come together hand in glove. Politics is concerned with the distribution of power and with strategies of maintaining or establishing just relations between people and the earth and God. Christian faith, well summarized by the Golden Rule (treat others as you wish to be treated yourself) or parables such as the Good Samaritan does the same thing. The laws of Moses and the Pentateuch establish limits and directions for Holy and just living. And as the Mennonite John Howard Yoder demonstrated, there is such a thing as the *Politics of Jesus*.

The influence of ego and self-service noted, partisan politics has all sorts of limitations. Think of Quebecois Catholics under Duplessis, or the religious right under Donald Trump or the Bushes. Think of the established Church of England and the lengthy disputes between Puritans and Catholics. Historical Anglican adversaries argue about more than just churchmanship believe me. They argue about the place of Church in Society and the nature of society itself. History cannot separate the two but in our current age some try.

I wonder how Karl Marx might have read today's description of Church life from the Book of Acts. Luke the historian is keen to describe in detail the acts of God the Holy Spirit after the resurrection of Jesus. His description is detailed and enthusiastic:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **Awe came upon everyone**, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. **All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.**

In what some call the "Jerusalem Communism" we see a perfect society, where need meets resource and where sharing of ritual and goods and services is natural and normal. The language of competition is absent; Surplus is distributed and allocated; all seems well with this particular world. The paeon continues:

Day by day, **as they spent much time together in the temple**, they broke bread at home and **ate their food with glad and generous hearts**, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Now some will say that Luke describes here a religious and not a secular society. No city could run like this church, they say. Things

are possible in faith communities which are impossible outside of church-land. I don't agree. Firstly, the ancients would not understand such a distinction. Further, in my experience the social dynamics which either succeed or fail in all communities are identical inside or outside the church, any church, even this church. It is noteworthy however that this early Christian society practiced daily worship--their daily cycle includes intentional praise and worship. If they possess **glad and generous hearts** it is because they are in touch with extra-ordinary gladness and generosity on a daily basis. Good on them!

Some will say this particular vision is simply too good to be true. It must be admitted that only two chapters later in the Book of Acts (we cannot say how much real time elapsed, whether months or years) the whole thing collapsed. It's quite a let down. Coming from the West Coast and Vancouver Island specifically I am familiar with historic and contemporary failures in community experiment. Communal living is darned hard work. Whether it's Jim Cruikshank talking about the early days of the Sorrento Centre, or Jehovah's Witnesses settling in Sooke around the start of the twentieth century, or my own experience as a music student in London, England in the late 1970s, or a Baptist-inspired community at the North end of Shawnigan Lake, communities come and go; they struggle to find focus and order, and sadly, they usually are short-lived.

If short lived, I wonder why Luke included the story in the first place. Probably, it was noteworthy because it happened, and that's significant. Also at the level of inspiration, we all need ideals and models to strive for. We may not find here a template for communal living in every situation, but we are given a hint of the possibility of a different order and way of living from what we experience most days.

So why bother? What's the point of living differently? Is the Gospel truly counter-cultural? What does "success" in religion actually look like? I love the last line of today's Gospel from John. Jesus, the gate for the sheep, the attractive and inviting voice of God to all seeker who desire safety, refuge, compassion and love:

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.**

Ah yes, abundant life. I'll take that and I'm sure you will also. The question is of course, how to make that happen. Part of the answer lies in the local faith community, in our Anglican institution--the parish church, whether a cathedral or not. Someone asked me the other day "how's it going at St. Pauls?" I thought for a moment and the phrase came to me. I couldn't recall its source at the time – a hymn? – a prayer? I said it's a congregation of people with *glad and*

generous hearts. Then, on Tuesday I began to prepare this sermon, and there it was:

(T)hey broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

The quality of life in a local faith community must never be devalued or falsified. The influence of our communal speech, thoughts and actions is supremely important. Our ability to show respect, to trust and to speak the truth courageously is invaluable. Obviously we are not perfect. We bury this afternoon one of our own for whom gruffness and generosity came together in a unique and wonderful combination. My own eccentricities and foibles are on display, weekly, and free of charge; Likewise, yours in different ways. Believe it or not, this is Good news! All are welcome! Never underestimate the value (and the complexity) of authentic local Christian community.

Now concerning the forthcoming election, in that process we also have influence and derive benefit. To what extent could or should you take the ideals from Acts Two into the ballot box? While I continue to advocate for electoral reform at all levels for a variety of reasons, we have an accessible and accountable process in Canada and British Columbia which exceeds the standard of most nations or states globally. So participate and vote if you have not already done so. I continue to believe that we all want the same thing--

something similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs--of safety, security and stability. The principal difference in parties and platforms is the strategy of how to accomplish these good things.

In my previous parish we were the goto place for municipal, provincial and federal electoral debates. I took the lead of former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams who invited British churches to throw open the doors for debate in United Kingdom elections. For Williams, as for myself, the church has a valid and necessary place in the Public Square and participation in the electoral conversation, even controversially though never exploitatively is a vital part of such engagement. In such engagement Rowan Williams prays and works for

meaningful action, action that announces the presence of the **fundamental giving** on which the world rests and entails also **taking responsibility for the other**, for the suffering, for those experiencing meaninglessness (*Faith in the Public Square*)

May such initiative be in your thoughts and minds as you exercise your electoral franchise this election. May the gladness and generosity of God take root in our hearts, our church, our community and God's world. Amen.