

“ARE YOU SERIOUS?”
6. Called to Community
Isaiah 47:8-11; Acts 2:42-47

For those of you who haven't been here over the past few weeks – and for those who have been here, but have forgotten – we're currently having a look at what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple, and asking ourselves how serious we are about it. This came out of our discussions as a church last autumn and, under the title “*Are You Serious?*” we have been looking at how we are **called by Jesus, called to Jesus, called to give and called to commitment**. It's been about our **personal response** to Jesus, to his teaching and to his call on our lives.

And “personal” is a significant word in our vocabulary these days. The individual is seen as the most important thing, the focus of our attention day by day. Our talk is of individual rights, of our personal identity – and all the baggage that goes with that – of our self-development, self-growth. It is obvious in everything from social media to the ways in which our banking, our education, our health care and all the rest are carefully tailored to fit each individual person. Much of that is to be admired and encouraged, but there is also a danger that we become increasingly isolationist in our thinking and, of course, increasingly selfish, very conscious of our own situation but rather less aware of the needs and situations of others.

Of course, humanity has always had that sense of self at its heart – we all have that innate instinct to survive and to prosper as an individual. Some would call that personal development, others would call it selfishness. Read through the Bible and there is plenty there about personal survival, not last in many of the Psalms. But it wasn't really until the 18th century European Enlightenment and the work of people such as Descartes and Voltaire that the autonomy of the individual became a real philosophical theme. Treatises such as *The Rights of Man* laid the emphasis very heavily on what we do for ourselves and what we feel we deserve. To some extent, though, it remained a kind of intellectual concept.

In more recent times, the hedonism and liberation of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s saw that kind of thinking spill out into a wider constituency. “Whatever turns you on!” was the watchword and many of the established norms of the past were overturned in the search for personal experience and individual fulfilment. It became more about “me” than “us” for many people. And that soon became a political and economic mantra as successive governments shaped legislation and fiscal policy to shift the emphasis away from any kind of community identity to a real focus on individuals. It was an attempt to appeal to naked self-interest in order to shape society in particular way. So you could hear a government minister (in this case Sir George Young) say on television, “*I have no responsibility to anyone except myself and my family*”. And, in an interview in, of all places, *Woman's Own*, the prime minister could say in 1987,

“There is no such thing as Society. There are individual men and women and there are families.” For many, many people, that idea is now firmly embedded in our consciousness.

And it has naturally made its mark in the life of the church too, as we – particularly in our tradition – put a lot of emphasis on personal salvation, on a personal response to Jesus, on what God can do for me. But that is not, I would suggest, the way God planned it. Those words from the fiery Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, which we heard a few minutes ago, make very clear that we are not to see ourselves as individual units of consumption and ambition. We cannot ignore the fact that God created us to live in community. After all, according to the biblical account we have of creation, God’s first observation after Adam appeared was that it was not good for him to be alone. Look at what Isaiah says here. He is talking to those who are *“lounging in their security”* and convincing themselves that everything is OK for them. *“Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you when you say to yourself, ‘I am, and there is none besides me’.”* We are not created to look after number one, to be alone and autonomous.

And, as we are so often seeing, Jesus came to inaugurate God’s Kingdom, God’s rule in the cosmos. He came to help restore what was lost of the original creation when evil had leaked in and messed everything up. Jesus was about getting things back to the way God wants them to be, renewing creation and humanity within it: the project of transformation. Part of that renewal was to revive the idea of community and help people to see that a constant desire for self-satisfaction was not what was in God’s original plan. As Jesus wandered about in first century Palestine he called people to him as individuals, recognising the personal worth of each one and treating them as people personally loved by God, but calling them together as community. Those who are serious about being disciples, followers of Jesus are **called to community**.

Yes, we see Jesus connecting with people such as Nicodemus and Zacchaeus and Peter on a personal level, but we also see him drawing crowds to him, gathering a group of disciples around him, reaching out to those who had been shunned by others and were having to live on the very margins of community and thus losing out on so much that would have helped and affirmed and supported them.

And, as that group of disciples grew and started to experience God’s presence through his Holy Spirit, as they started to discover what living in the Kingdom of God was all about, as they realised that their needs and aspirations and hopes and fears united them rather than divided them, they started to live out that sense of community as a kind of witness to the wider world around them. That’s what the little passage in *Acts 2* is all about.

These first believers, the first disciples of Jesus, put into practice what Jesus had been teaching and demonstrating in his own ministry, the very antithesis of the attitudes that Isaiah had been criticising. They started to live out the idea of community. Now, we do need to acknowledge that we don't know how long they kept it up, and the history of the Church is littered with examples of Christians who certainly didn't live up to these ideals, from the Renaissance popes to the bling-festooned pedlars of the prosperity gospel today – as well as an awful lot of ordinary Christians who quite happily accommodate themselves to the prevailing attitudes of our consumerist culture today – but this seems to me to be something worth aspiring to and is certainly closer to what Jesus taught than much of what passes for Christian discipleship today. Let's just note the characteristics of this community.

This was all done together. The clear thrust of what Luke writes in these verses is that these followers of Jesus were in it together, they were one in mind, purpose and behaviour. This knocks very firmly on the head the idea that you don't have to go to church – or be part of a Christian group – to be a Christian. You cannot and must not seek to live out your devotion to Christ alone, isolated, unsupported and independent.

These new believers got together to **learn**. They “*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching*”. One of the biggest dangers of going it alone is that you start to develop your own theology, your own ideas about God and Jesus. Whatever else you may think about tradition, we need to draw on that teaching that has been handed down over generations and has thus guarded the truths about God and humanity and what God's plan is and how we fit into that. In hearing that teaching we can help one another understand it and share our insights into how we live it out day by day. If you don't already do so, try and get into a housegroup and draw on the teaching of the Bible and the words of Jesus along with other people.

And that coming together led, quite naturally to what is translated here as “*fellowship*”. This is one of those Greek words that means so much more than one single English word can communicate. The Greek word is “*koinonia*” and it encompasses what we would express in English not just as fellowship (which is a pretty churchy word) but also as community, mutual support, unity. It's a shared sense of doing life together, helping one another along, supporting and guiding one another with a commonality of purpose. The kind of Greek that was spoken in the time this was written was called “*koine Greek*” – from the same root – and it meant a common language, accessible to all and comprehensible to all, a language of community. These people **together** lived out the values and ideals of the Kingdom of God

They also **worshipped together**. Luke describes what was clearly a shared act of worship in the “*breaking of bread and prayer*”. They got together to share communion and to pray together to God. Once again, you will come across people who say that they can worship God wherever they are – a walk

in the Peaks is as good a way of connecting with God as coming into a stuffy building and singing a lot of old songs. That is totally true: you can connect with God in a good country walk, or a long cycle ride or sitting on the beach or in a corner of Costa. But you need the other as well. Worshipping together adds another, indispensable, dimension to your relationship with God. Being with other disciples is an encouragement, a support and a way of expressing your citizenship in the Kingdom of God. And for those first believers it meant experiencing the power of God in action as the awesome presence of God was made real to them (v43). You never know, that might happen here one day!

And then, of course, there was their **commonality**. This is probably the most radical – and even controversial – aspect of all this. They “*had everything in common*”. Now, we can do our very best to explain all this away – it was early and naïve enthusiasm: it was a much different economic context: it was an ideal that, as we touched on earlier, never really took off: it wouldn’t work today. But I have a sneaking suspicion that it’s intended as a model for us to follow rather than as a policy for us to dissect. The people who had plenty even sold off some of it – all of it? – to help those who were struggling. This community of Christians, as we read elsewhere, was ground-breaking in that it included slaves and slave-owners, former criminals and government officials (often not the same people!), rich entrepreneurs and those who had been abandoned by a society that had no welfare networks such as we have today. And they helped each other. Look at what we read a couple of chapters further on – *Acts 4:32-35*. We do our best to emulate some of that through foodbanks and night shelters and free meals and all the rest – but it’s still not quite as radical as these disciples. Could we, should we do more? How do we ensure that no-one is in need? And anyway, isn’t it the government’s responsibility today? (That’s something to talk about in your nice warm housegroups this week, before you have your posh coffee and chunky biscuits.)

And then there was simply the **social aspect** of it all. They just enjoyed being together and having time together as friends. They met in public places – “*the temple courts*” – and they ate together in their homes. (“*Breaking bread*” in v46 is just eating together, as distinct from “*the breaking of bread*” in v42 which was celebrating communion.) Today they’d probably have met up for coffee or a curry out in town as well as having people round for tea, or going for a walk along the canal or cycling round the lanes or shuffling round the garden centre together. These were people who enjoyed each other’s company, who shared their joy of life together, who met and encouraged and built up and helped one another. They were a community.

And, finally, they were a community that was noticed. Luke tells us that they “*enjoyed the favour of all the people*”, to such an extent that other people wanted to join them. The many positives of life in community somehow proved attractive to people in the wider culture. In a society that seems sometimes to be growing more and more insular, more and more introverted and focussed on the individual, the

disciples of Jesus today have a clear responsibility to model a communal life that is attractive and aspirational, that says something powerful about God's commitment to transformation.

As we express our gratitude and offer our prayers for those who in this city work hard to foster a sense of community and create a culture in which all feel valued – our councillors and officers and public servants – let's also recognise our responsibility as disciples of Jesus and do our utmost to live out this calling to community day by day. And let us demonstrate in our attitudes as well as our words and our behaviour that a living faith in Jesus can make a positive difference as well.

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Questions for reflection and discussion

- 1) What are some of the signs of a society that is geared to the individual? Would you say that our current society is like that?
- 2) Why do we not follow the example of the first Christians? (If you think we do, explain how it is worked out in practice.)
- 3) What are the things we most need to work on to foster a sense of community?
- 4) Is it practical to have everything in common? Why/why not? If it's not practical, why do you think the Bible seems to say that it is?

5) What strikes you most forcefully about this passage? What are you going to do in response to this study?