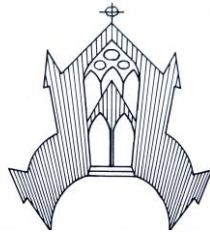


Stokesley Methodist Church



Sunday 7th April 2024



A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources

Come, all who are in need, all who are lonely.

Come, young and old, and everyone in between.

Come, if you are hurting and healthy, weary or happy.

Come, whether you are joyful or sad.

Come, to the 'grace giver', the one who welcomes us home.

Come, and worship our God.

Generous God, who shares our life, pouring out the Spirit of Jesus, open our hearts and hands to reach out to one another, and to those we live or work among in caring and service, love and compassion.

Amen

Lectionary Readings:

Acts 4 v32-35 (p1096) The Believers Share Their Possessions

Psalms 133 (p625) How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!

1 John 1 v1-2 v2 (p1225) The Word of Life/Walking in the Light

John 20 v19-31 (p1089) Jesus Appears to his Disciples/Jesus Appears to Thomas

Living as a Generous Community

Luke gives a brief description of life in the new Christian community.

No-one claimed exclusive ownership of their possessions or wealth; everything was held in common. Property and land was sold to make sure no-one was left in need. And, supported by this, the apostles were able to preach powerfully the message of the risen Christ.

This description of the Early Church in Jerusalem is both attractive and challenging. Our context is different, but this does not prevent us from recapturing something of the vibrant generosity found within the Church and in its outreach. At a time when so many suffer from insecurity, economic anxiety and loneliness, we need to show that ours is a welcoming and generous faith, one that listens, cares, acts, and engages with people where they are.

After Peter and John are threatened by the authorities and told 'not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus' (Acts 4 v18), the believers pray that they may speak with boldness while 'signs and wonders are performed' in the name of Jesus.

They were again 'filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness' (4 v30-31). This second outpouring of the Holy Spirit, in response to prayer, is associated with the generous sharing in today's passage that follows on immediately. There is a strong connection established here, and noted by many early Christian writers, between evangelism, speaking with boldness, and healing, performing signs and wonders. This is not surprising given the squalor in which so many people lived. Poverty and disability, pollution and sickness, social exclusion and malnutrition, unemployment and mental affliction are

interlinked. This is the important social context of the wondrous signs of the healing power of God. They are securely rooted in the common life of the apostolic community. The preaching of God's word is accompanied by the embodiment of God's generosity. So, isolation gives way to time together, hunger is satisfied by shared meals, and basic needs are met by the distribution of possessions.

Psalms 133 begins with an observation that most would agree with, 'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity'. In his arid environment the psalmist likens harmonious relationships to olive oil soothing dry skin and mountain dew refreshing parched throats. On their way to Jerusalem pilgrims sang this 'Song of Ascents'. They became kindred as God's community, worshipping the Creator who said, 'It is not good for the human to be alone' (Genesis 2 v18). The first letter of John proclaims the message of 'kindred-ness' afresh, that, in order to create 'fellowship' that is 'with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' and so 'with one another', we must 'walk the talk' together.

Mary Magdalene proclaimed the resurrection to Jesus' brothers, 'I have seen the Lord' (John 20 v18), but despite this the disciples are still in hiding, locked away 'for fear of the Jews'. It is likely that some of the first readers of John were themselves fearful of their wider society, such as those we read of who believed in Jesus but were too frightened to confess it. Indeed, we may find it easier to confess our faith behind the doors of our churches than in the world outside. But locked doors are no obstacle for the risen Jesus, who brings them his gift of peace. To those wondering where they belong in the world, he brings peace that is nothing less than a new creation by the Spirit. It was only when Thomas was able to see for himself that the crucified Jesus was the risen Christ that Thomas proclaimed his faith unequivocally, 'My Lord and my God!' But we who, like the first readers of the Gospel, 'have not seen' can know Jesus' blessing of peace by putting the testimony of the Gospel to the test of living it out in the world so 'that through believing you may have life in his name'.

In Edith Nesbit's *The Railway Children*, Bobbie, Peter and Phyllis discover that the station porter, Mr Perks, who has always been extremely helpful, is going to have a birthday but wasn't in the habit of celebrating it. The children decide that they ought to do something special and ask the villagers to join in. So, they arrange a party and presents. However, Perks is affronted thinking it is 'charity'. It takes all Bobbie's and Mrs Perks' tact and diplomacy to show that the gifts and the party were not intended to show up Perk's inability to provide, but a genuine thank you from the whole community for all that Perks did and was. The story shows that generosity also includes showing sensitivity toward those whom you want to help.

In Acts, we see that what marked out that early Christian community was a generous lifestyle. They encouraged one another, shared with one another, prayed together, learnt together and supported those in need. Of course, they weren't perfect, but they realised they were meant to be a community that was open to others.

This is a challenge to us today. One church had a motto 'no eating, no meeting!' It was difficult to fulfil at times, and much more difficult during Covid and even afterwards. However, it does point out a deficiency in churches today – are we agenda-driven or fellowship orientated. People matter more than programmes; we need to get to know one another, to love and care for one another as well as to continue in the apostles' teaching and prayers.

Sending Out Prayer

Lord, your generous love was showered upon us in Jesus.
Help us to be generous to those among whom we live or meet.
Guide us in building and becoming a generous community,
as we seek to put our faith into action.
We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake.

Amen.