

Fourth Sunday of Easter (A)
Acts 2.42-47 / I Peter 2.19-25 / John 10.1-10
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
13 April 2008

What Was and Is

~Paul H. Friesen~

There's a lot of sheep wandering through today's Scriptures and plenty of pasture—and also shepherds and sheep stealers, and sheepfolds and sheep gates. They are all worth thinking about. The life of sheep was compared to the life of human beings by the Hebrew prophets, the authors of the Psalms and by Jesus.

But there's a lot of people in today's Scriptures too. When the story from the Acts of the Apostles opens we have just heard that 3000 people had been baptized in the course of one day. And we hear that people were joining this very first Christian community daily. So we're going to think about this today.

From what we read in the rest of the New Testament Scriptures it seems that this first church had many exceptional qualities. It began as a mass movement of Jews in a particular place, Jerusalem, at a particular time, one year between 30 and 35 a.d. That year between the Jewish Festivals of Passover (the time of Jesus' death and Resurrection) and Pentecost (when the church exploded in numbers) the church became a distinct community.

As the months and decades went by, the church quickly evolved. It found it could no longer worship in the temple in Jerusalem or synagogues elsewhere, so it

created its own meeting places. It drew in fellow Jews who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire—in southern Europe, north Africa, the Middle East—and also those in western Asia. But soon it also drew in Gentiles (non-Jews) who were completely unfamiliar with what we call the Old Testament. And the church created its own distinct life and worship.

Yet today's short story from *The Acts of the Apostles* has remained at the centre of Christian faith to the present.

It falls into two parts, the first verse which describes the *worship of the early church* and the following five verses which describe the *life of the early church*.¹ The two are closely connected. And together they tell us almost more than we need to know

The story begins with worship: 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.' If this sounds familiar it's not because we only hear it when we read these verses in Acts.

Whenever there is a baptism we repeat these words as a whole body, with the candidates, godparents, and sponsors. We are all asked: 'Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?' And we each reply, together: 'I will, with God's help.'²

We are baptized into a family gathered from all nations and all segments of society. We are not actually baptized into a philosophy or an organization, but into

¹ C.K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p.162. It seems clear that while life and worship are tangled together, the verses describe worship as a special gathering.

² *The Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: ABC, 1985), p.159.

a Christian family, a world-wide clan. It makes perfect sense that we gather together regularly with one branch of that family wherever we are settled or wherever we find ourselves on Sunday, the day of the resurrection, the day Christians claimed long before there was government legislation to protect it.

If we were dropped into that early community we would probably be stunned by the gestures, and language, and music of their worship. It would seem very, very different from ours. But underneath it lay what still underlies our own worship.

First, what was and is the apostles' teaching? If we read the sermons in the *Acts of the Apostles* we get a pretty clear idea. The apostles constantly connected the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension to all the Scriptures of their ancestors.

The Apostles and the first Christians didn't think they were creating a new religion, but publicizing the completion of the work of God which had begun at creation, and continued through Abraham, and Moses and the Israelites, and the prophets.

It is why as Christians today, when we gather for worship, we read the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures along with the story of Jesus passed down to us, in our New Testament—in the Gospels and the *Acts of the Apostles*, and in the letters of the Apostles. Together, all these Scriptures are the ancient but always fresh source of our shared thoughts.

Second, what was and is 'fellowship'? Well, it may include tea after the liturgy, but it was and is much

more than that. The early church was a mixture of worshippers of different races and ages, and religions, and classes, and opinions, and tastes, a body that was intent on worshipping together, in good faith, with a focus on Jesus Christ.

The members of the early Christian family didn't believe that worship wiped out their differences, but rather that the story of Jesus Christ caught up everyone's different stories in it. The variety of human life and experience that was brought to the worship of Christ was meant to be shared with all. The meaning of Christ was for the whole world. It was meant to create human fellowship, because the church believed and confessed that Christ did not die and rise to create religious boutiques, but to destroy hostility and to create a family that was harmonious, like a human body whose very different parts worked together, and is alive and is growing.

Christian organizations often 'specialize' in attracting certain kinds of people to do certain kinds of things, but not the church. All Christians need to be rooted in a local church, a Christian family whose desire is to bring its differences to Christ who interprets each of us to the other. Marketing and sociology might help create specific Christian organizations, but they don't help us create a church, a local Christian family. We don't screen applicants to create human families—we give thanks for our variety and share in a common life. So it is with the 'fellowship' Christians share in worship.

Third, what was and is 'the breaking of bread'? It was and is quite simply a repetition of the Last Supper, in which Jesus interpreted his life and death and resurrection in terms of the sharing of himself for the

healing of the world. The bread and wine were thought of as the gift of Christ's body and blood, Christ's whole existence, for the healing of the world. This is what we call 'grace', God's pure love for us, unearned by any of us, always waiting for us, the heart of our confidence.

When you think of it, it is amazing that we are still doing this two thousand years later. But we would have ceased to exist were it not for this. There is nothing that more clearly shows Christianity is not first a philosophy, or ideology or a religion among other religions, or an organization, than the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, or the Eucharist. We gather around a Table to eat and drink in Christ's name—we are a family.

Fourth, what was and is 'the prayers'? It seems to refer to the words, and emotions we address to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in each other's company. There is no end to the variety of languages and poetry and art and music with which we do this around the globe. And there is no doubt about the focus of them—how Jesus Christ has changed the world, and how Christ can change the world.

The prayers of the early church as its members gathered—its worship—were not selfish, but generous. The prayers looked inward, but turned outward. They did not look to God to make life easier for themselves, but to make their lives have meaning for others, to continue the healing, renewing work of Jesus Christ. It is why our own prayers—our worship—are a balance between objective and subjective, our feelings and desires and the realities of others, our need to express

ourselves, and the need of all of us to express ourselves in words bigger than any of us could express. And so we pray today, too.

We know that every local Christian church, and the whole Christian family fall short on every one of the four qualities of Christian worship, but they never fail to renew us. ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.’

If we fall short in shared worship, how much must we fall short in shared life! We read much about this community in a few words. They were a part of each other’s lives beyond the hours of worship—they shared their possessions as the need arose, they even sold what they owned to distribute the money as the need arose. They ate together in each other’s homes, and interacted generously with their surprised neighbours.

Many things have been written about these verses. Some scholars make this out to say all Christian communities should live entirely communally, like a big family. At the other extreme are those who say this community was clearly exceptional and not a model at all for Christians that followed after.

The truth is that it’s not all so clear. We read later in the *Acts of the Apostles* of great problems—of families that hypocritically said they gave far more of their wealth than they actually did.

And we read of great tension between those ‘from away’, and local Christians, which had to be resolved. And we read in the rest of the New Testament there

were many models of shared life presented by different Christian communities—some more like our own.

But something is quite clear—the worship of the first verse of our Scripture for today is meant to be reflected in the life of the last five verses of our Scripture today.

The early church heard the Apostles' teaching, and they tried to live out between gatherings for worship.

The early church tried to let the fellowship of worship spill into the fellowship of daily life, and what they shared in worship, be shared in daily life.

The early church tried to let the breaking of bread at the Lord's Table become a model for eating at each other's table, in good faith and to the glory of God and for the benefit of everyone around their table whom they freely invited.

And the early church tried to make their whole lives resonate with the prayers they prayed when gathered for worship.

The worship of the first verse of our Scripture for today is meant to be reflected in the life of the last five verses of our Scripture today.

In God's mercy we will be able to do the same, in worship and in life, and in our meetings to plan our life and worship together.

So much has changed from the days of the early church, yet so much, the most central things, have not changed at all.

Amen.