

## **Second Sunday of Easter 2021 (11.04.2021)**

### **Acts 4: 32 – 35; John 20: 1 – end**

We're celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. Easter isn't just a one day wonder that happened last week on Easter Day. There is a season of Easter that extends over six weeks. Just as we have spent over six weeks in Lent preparing for Easter Day, so after Easter Day we spend over six weeks celebrating. The two perfectly counter-balance each other. So, our services are peppered with loud acclamations of "Alleluia!" This season of Easter is a season of unequivocal and unabashed exuberance – "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluiah!"

And therefore it seems a bit early on in proceedings to be pouring buckets full of cold water over excitement. But we do just need to manage some expectations. The sound bite that could sum up today's Bible readings might be: there's a difference between idealism and realism. We have today one Bible

reading which would seem to suggest that when people get influenced by the resurrected life of Jesus they reject – we ought to reject – the principle of private property and live out a sort of economic communalism. Well, the first thing to say is that, whilst it cannot be denied that is precisely what we have just heard from the Acts of the Apostles chapter 4, there is actually not a shred of evidence that that ever happened. So whatever's going on in Acts 4, and whatever value it does have for us as Christians today, it's not historical fact.

But even if it were historical fact, that still doesn't mean that we must do what the early Christian church did, just because their activities are recorded in the Bible. We're not fundamentalists. Whatever decisions Christians have to make, we have to balance what the Bible might say together with tradition and reason. And different Christians will give different emphasis to each of those factors. Put very simply, Evangelicals will put a greater emphasis on the Bible; Catholics –

and by that I don't just mean Roman Catholics, but all Catholics, Anglican Catholics included – will place a greater emphasis on tradition; and liberal Christians will put a greater emphasis on reason. That's a gross simplification, but I think it's fair enough as a generalisation.

And it means that any Christian looking at Acts 4 will say: OK, the text says “no-one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common”; but there's no tradition to suggest that that's an inevitable consequence of being a Christian; and our reason, or knowledge, of the bloody, miserable consequences of translating those ideals into state economic communism in the C20th tells us they're not a cracking idea anyway.

But that doesn't mean we're finished with Acts chapter 4. We're not quite ready to tear the page out of the Bible and throw it away. Being a Christian doesn't mean that what's yours in mine; or what's yours is

hers; or what's his is yours: individual Christians don't pool their resources. But that it is how the Church of England operates. Each church pays its bills to keep the doors open and then it pools its money out of a commitment to ensuring that ministry is maintained in every community in every part of England. That's what “sending money to York” means. It means that in communities where every other agency has withdrawn – no post office, no bank, no shops, no Police Station, no pub – the Church is still present.

Only, the financial model isn't working. About five years ago York Diocese said “Let's adopt Acts chapter 4: let's rely on each parish to be infused and enthused by resurrection joy and generosity and to offer what they can.” And guess what: it worked. What we pooled covered our shared budget. But every year since then, across the dioceses – not at the Priory, I'm pleased to say, or at least not until 2020 – what we pooled flat lined. And as costs increased year on year,

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the gap was made up by dipping into reserves. The available reserves run out in two years' time.

So throughout 2021 there's a consultation going on across York Diocese. It's called Living Christ's Story. The Priory's church council – the council anyone on the church's roll can offer to join at the annual meeting in mid-May – will be contributing to the process in the early summer. The leadership team of the Bridlington Deanery – the churches in Bridlington and the surrounding villages – has spent the last month or so formulating its initial response. And we've been doing the maths as it applies to this deanery. We have five full-time paid-for clergy. We don't expect the amount of money we pool to recover to pre-pandemic levels before the end of 2022. If it then increases, by say a couple of per cent per year, the amount of money we pool will cover the cost of less than four full-time paid-for clergy.

Now I don't think this means I am likely to be, made redundant. But I do think that it is absolutely realistic that when I move on – and I'm not dropping any hints: I'm not intending to go anywhere anytime soon – but when the time does come for me to move on, I don't think it's realistic for the Priory to expect to have again a full-time paid-for Rector. Those days are gone.

But you know what they say – we don't have problems: we just have opportunities – because, let's face it (and I'm not saying this out of any sense of self-pity) the professional top-down model of ministry hasn't really served us very well. As I look out into this congregation I see a strong team of able and committed people with whom it is my joy and my privilege to share ministry. But what I don't see is the next generation of people who are going to replace them.

And that's why the Living Christ's Story consultation isn't just about money. It's about growing younger

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congregations and it's about releasing lay ministry to be able to grow younger congregations. So the re-shaping of the future needn't just be about sharing clergy across parishes: it might be about sharing governance and administrative know-how across parishes as well.

The peace of realism about living out the resurrected Christ's story which ought actually to encourage us in this consultation process, is the story in our other Bible reading this morning: the story of Doubting Thomas; only I don't want to think about Thomas and his faith or lack of it. I want to think about the resurrected Christ whose story Thomas was given evidence to believe in. That resurrected Christ had wounds that Thomas could feel and into which he could place his hand. The resurrected Christ is a wounded Christ. The resurrection life is a wounded life. We will work out how faithfully to live Christ's story after 2021 not despite our fragility and

woundedness, but because of our fragility and woundedness.

Amen.