

Sermon for Holy Communion on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 7th May 2017

Acts 2:42-47 - Sharing the Common Life

You have listened to our lesson from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, telling how the early Christians lived in a sort of hippy commune, 'They met constantly to hear the apostles teach and to share the common life, to break bread and to pray. All whose faith had drawn them together held everything in common: they would sell their property and possessions and make a general distribution as the need of each required.' [Acts 2:42,44-45, NEB]

These lines from the Acts of the Apostles seem to imply that the earliest Christians were effectively Communists. 'From each according to his ability: to each according to his need'. Those words are not only in the Acts of the Apostles, but also in Karl Marx [Critique of the Gotha Programme, 1875 - accessed at https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/From_each_according_to_his_ability,_to_each_according_to_his_needs].

Oh, come on, you'll say. We didn't come to church to have even more politics thrown at us. That poor lady on YouTube, saying how fed up she was at yet another election, is probably ringing a bell with quite a lot of us.

There are lots of things in the Bible where, when you read them, you think, 'How could that fit with what we're supposed to believe about God?' or you worry about stuff in the Bible which says to you that God is telling you to live in a certain way - but it's completely impractical.

I think that today's lesson from the Acts is open to that kind of critique. It's just like the story of Jesus and the 'rich young ruler' in St Luke's Gospel, 18:18-30. It's all very well saying that, if you come to faith and become a Christian, you should give everything up; but we are full of practical objections. It's all very well, you might say, you giving everything up, but I wouldn't want to deprive my family.

Or we could have Margaret Thatcher's objection that the good Samaritan was only able to help the man who had fallen among thieves on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho because he, the Good Samaritan, had plenty of money.

What I'm driving at is that one of the vital things about Jesus - and it comes out in the Sermon on the Mount as well as here - is that Jesus asks us or challenges us to do what look, on the face of it, to be impossible things. He is challenging us to have a new value system. It is not appropriate to look at

somebody in terms of what they've got - So-and-so must be a successful man because he has - some wonderful thing, whatever it is he has: a Bentley, say.

Just as Jesus himself said to the rich young ruler who asked, 'What must I do in order to be saved?' 'Give up everything that you have; give to the poor', and the bloke went away very troubled, because he had a Mercedes in the drive, fees at Danes Hill to pay and a £3000 bill from American Express. You know, it's just not practical to stop the roundabout and get off.

Last week, I went and had a look at one of the new houses that have been built next to the library in Cobham. Originally there were going to be 14 houses, but now there are 13. One reason for this is that, if there had been 14, they would have had to build so-called 'affordable housing' for some of it. The 13 houses range in price from £850,000 to just over £1 million each. If there had been an affordable house, it would have cost about £600,000. I leave you to judge whether that would have been affordable to a young couple starting out in life. But actually those houses will all get bought, and the so-called affordable houses that are on other developments will also get bought; and it may well be that some of the young people who get started on the housing ladder are helped by the 'bank of Mum and Dad'.

But not everybody can write a cheque to one or other of their children for £50,000 to give them the deposit on their new house. It's pretty well a question of luck; where you were born, who your folks were, what are you were able to do at school and university, (if you went there), and how your career has been since: whether it's been a moneymaking career or whether it's been a career with real social worth but limited pay horizons, like teaching or being a hospital doctor.

A junior doctor, like my two daughters, starts at £23,000 a year. A teacher starts around the same level. If you remember the old rules of thumb that we used to use for mortgages when we bought our first houses, three times the main breadwinner's income and half the second income: so for a married couple of junior doctors, £69,000 plus half of £23,000, £11,500, making a total mortgage available of £80,500, not a lot in the context of an affordable house costing £600,000. Is this acceptable? Ought not government do something to change it?

And in the Cobham area, since we opened 3 1/2 years ago, our Cobham Area Foodbank has handed out over 44 metric tons of food to people, living here on our doorstep, who not only couldn't afford an affordable house, but they can't even afford to buy food.

So where am I going? I am going to make an observation at least in part about our modern society, and that of necessity means that I am making a

political point. But, you say, the church shouldn't do that. The Church should be very neutral and not get involved in day-to-day politics.

Pete Broadbent, the acting Bishop of London, put out a circular on Friday about the impending general election which referred to the former Archbishop William Temple's book, *Christianity and Social Order*, published in 1942, and this is what he quoted:

'... we are obliged to ask, concerning every field of human activity, what is the purpose of God for it. If we find this purpose, it will be the true and proper nature of that activity, and the relation of the various activities to one another in the divine purpose will be the 'Natural Order' of those activities. To bring them into that Order, if they have in fact departed from it, must be one part of the task of the Church as the Body of Christ. If what has true value as a means to an end beyond itself is in fact being sought as an end in itself, the Church must rebuke this dislocation of the structure of life and if possible point out the way of recovery. It is bound to 'interfere' because it is by vocation the agent of God's purpose, outside the scope of which no human interest or activity can fall.'" [Temple, W., 1942, *Christianity and Social Order*, London, Penguin Books: reprinted by Shephard-Welwyn, London, 1987: p.38]

The church must always look for God's purpose in our everyday lives - and that includes our political world. And it must get actively involved: as Archbishop Temple said, even in the stress of the first half of WW2, 'It is bound to 'interfere' because it is by vocation the agent of God's purpose'.

So we Christians must approach the current elections with that in mind. What would Jesus do? Where is God's purpose?

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have just issued a 'pastoral letter' to all the churches in this country about the impending General Election.

The Archbishops say:

"This election is being contested against the backdrop of deep and profound questions of identity.

"Opportunities to renew and reimagine our shared values as a country and a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland only come around every few generations.

"We are in such a time.

"Our Christian heritage, our current choices and our obligations to future generations and to God's world will all play a shaping role.

“If our shared British values are to carry the weight of where we now stand and the challenges ahead of us, they must have at their core cohesion, courage and stability.”

The Archbishops highlight major concerns over poverty, housing and the dangers of “crushing” debt among other issues.

They call for a generous and hospitable welcome to refugees and migrants but also warn against being “deaf to the legitimate concerns” about the scale of migration into some communities.

They also single out the importance of standing up for those suffering persecution on grounds of faith around the world.

Faith, they argue, has a unique role to play in preventing extremism and religiously motivated violence.

“Contemporary politics needs to re-evaluate the importance of religious belief.

“The assumptions of secularism are not a reliable guide to the way the world works, nor will they enable us to understand the place of faith in other people’s lives.

“Parishes and Chaplaincies of the Church of England serve people of all faiths and none.

“Their contribution and that of other denominations and faiths to the well-being of the nation is immense – schools, food banks, social support, childcare among many others – and is freely offered.

But the role of faith in society is not just measured in terms of service delivery.

“The new Parliament, if it is to take religious freedom seriously, must treat as an essential task the improvement of religious literacy.”

They add: “Political responses to the problems of religiously-motivated violence and extremism, at home and overseas, must also recognise that solutions will not be found simply in further secularisation of the public realm.”
[You can look up the full text at <http://tinyurl.com/l4pg7xm>]

So say our Archbishops, and we ought to consider carefully their advice. What do we think God’s will is in relation to the great issues at stake?

Is it more important to be British - and is it more important to be a United Kingdom - than to be part of the great European Union? Surely 'they', the 27 other EU nations, are our friends - or they were. How to preserve and deepen that friendship? Because after all, 'friendship' is a species of love, and Jesus taught that we should love one another.

What is the proper role of the state? Is it there to provide the best health treatment for all, paid for out of taxation, or should the NHS be allowed to fail and be privatised? Is it there to pay for our armed forces, and to provide them with every kind of weapon, including nuclear arms which, it has been argued, we could never use? Should state schools generally have to accept reduced budgets, but some schools, grammar and free schools, get more? Is it a good idea in general to shrink the cost of the public sector to 35% of GDP, compared with a European average around 48%? And so on. 'From each according to his ability, to each according to their needs'. That's the Biblical principle.

Plenty to think about. In closing let me congratulate all those who were elected in the local elections on Thursday - especially our own Mary Lewis, from this congregation - and let us turn our minds soberly and prayerfully to the choices offered to us in the General Election in a month's time. Can we invoke the spirit of those earliest disciples? As the last real President said, 'Yes, we can'. Yes, we can.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant