

Montague Pastoral Charge

April 7, 2024 – Second Sunday of Easter

Acts 4:32-35, Psalm 133, John 20:19-31

Sermon: “Like precious oil, running down the beard of Castro”

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You’ll notice that the Revised Common Lectionary doesn’t give us Old Testament readings in the season of Easter; instead we read from the second volume of Luke (also called the Book of Acts). That’s not because the Old Testament has become unimportant after Jesus’ resurrection – far from it. It’s just because the 50 days after Easter morning are the perfect time to consider the story of what the early Church did next. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all knew that Easter wasn’t the end of the story, but it seems Luke was the only one of the four to have a crack at continuing the story. That alone tells you something about why Luke was writing: 50 years or so after Jesus’ ministry, after a couple of gospels were already out there, Luke wants to look back and write a history, make it all into a cohesive story. After all, nothing like this had ever happened before. What happens when a man who was dead comes alive again? Well, this is what happens, the Church comes to be:

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

Well, they say that the secret to a happy pastoral relationship is that there are three things you should never talk about from the pulpit: money, politics, and religion. And so, this could be the end of the honeymoon, folks! My only plea is that you won’t shoot the messenger; if you have a problem, take it up with Luke! Because this is straight-up communism, isn’t it! Rich and poor alike, filled with the Spirit and spurred on by the miracle of Easter, give up private property and put everything they have into the central pot: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” as the early socialists put it.

The key New Testament word in the background here is *koinonia* – it means fellowship or sharing or communion. It’s the word you hear earlier in the Book of Acts: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” And it’s the word that Paul uses when he talks about what we call Holy Communion: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a *sharing* in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a *sharing* [fellowship, communion] in the body of Christ?”

Of course, any liberal economist from the past 3 hundred years could tear apart this *koinonia*, whether you call it “fellowship” or “sharing” or “communion” or “communism.” Everyone sells what they have and gives the money to the community, and everyone receives what they need... lovely, but for how long? Get rid of money and where’s the motivation for anyone to do any work? And how will this little economy sustain itself if they’re not producing anything? What’s their industry, what are their exports? Pulp and paper, copper, grain, sugar...?

Those who are familiar with the history of Cuba will know what happens when a socialist society isn't able to sell anything outside its borders.

And in fact, that may be just what happened to the early church in Jerusalem. When that motley group of idealistic Jesus-people came upon hard times, they needed to be supported with outside money. We know from the rest of the New Testament that Paul and others were frequently involved in sending money to what Paul calls "the saints in Jerusalem." When Luke tells us about those early days where everything was shared and everyone had what they needed, the modern economist would laugh him to scorn for looking back through rose-coloured glasses. "This is no way to run an economy! How did you think this would work? You can share everything and put all their money into a common pot, but if the community isn't making any new money, the common pot is going to run down pretty quickly, isn't it? You can't just count on more and more investors jumping on board forever and selling their houses. Don't you have to give a return to your investors at some point?"

It's certainly a strange economy. But I wonder: is it really stranger than the kind of economy we're familiar with: an economy that relies on growth at all costs, human and environmental, where businesses have to race each other to the bottom in order to offer their products at the lowest possible price? Is it stranger than an economy where the only way the poor are lifted up is when the self-interested business practices of a few trickle down to the many? Is it stranger than an economy that requires millions of people to be trapped paying interest on debts they will never pay off? Is it stranger than an economy where corporations are legally obliged to prioritise profits for their shareholders above any consideration for the greater good, say for the welfare of workers or the natural environment?

The American Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart argues that the modern corporate economy is unchristian to the core. "The corporation is ... morally bound to amorality," he says. He points to the American court decision in 1919 of *Dodge v. Ford*. That's when Henry Ford, whose company was making record profits on the Model T, wanted to direct those surplus profits away from the shareholders in order to build more plants, employ more workers, and to lower the cost of the car even more for the public good. Henry Ford explained: "My ambition is to employ still more men, to spread the benefits of this industrial system to the greatest possible number, to help them build up their lives and their homes. To do this we are putting the greatest share of our profits back in the business."

The Michigan Supreme Court disagreed. Their decision was that "A business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders. The powers of the directors are to be employed for that end." In other words, Henry Ford, be as idealistic as you like at home, but you're not allowed to use your company as a charity. Business isn't about making the world a better place.

Is the early Church economy really stranger than an economy where profit trumps goodness? Where we have to put a price tag on everything in order to choose right over wrong? Where we'll only think it's worthwhile, say, preserving precious wetlands if it's in the interest of corporate shareholders to do so? Where it isn't enough that all of us are shareholders in the common gift of creation?

Maybe the early Church economy is nonsense, but at least let's be fair: so is the one we live in. At least what Luke shows us is idealistic nonsense. On the other hand, maybe Luke isn't

actually trying to offer a long-term economic solution to the world's problems. We look at the early church and call it socialism, but perhaps think Luke is particularly interested in offering anything that ends in the letters "i-s-m." He isn't trying to teach us how to build a utopia; he's simply trying to write history. He's trying to tell us what happens after a crucified Messiah rises from the dead. And what happens is this: that rich and poor, young and old, mighty and humble, are drawn magnetically into community with one another – into *koinonia*, fellowship – at both the material and spiritual levels.

Because if Easter is real, if the future has shone into the present, if God has fulfilled and renewed all God's promises, if Christ has been raised from the dead, then it means all your wealth and status are completely relativized; it means that you simply can't *not* share your life with others who know this truth. In other words, it isn't that a bunch of like-minded do-gooders set out to start a revolution to fix the world; it's that a group of diverse (and probably unlike-minded) people are so utterly shaken up by the miracle of the resurrection that they just *will* end up living together and sharing everything. And they'll just have to trust each other.

That's the only problem with Thomas in our Gospel reading. Thomas is a remarkable disciple. He's brave and insightful, and it's right that he should be the one to make the final confession of who Jesus is: "My Lord and my God!" He doesn't deserve to be mocked as "Doubting Thomas" (as if anyone else believed the resurrection story at first!) But Thomas is still in the wrong, and we shouldn't make him into a hero, either. But the sin of Thomas (if you want to call it that) isn't doubt so much as mistrust. He doesn't trust his friends; he doesn't believe them when they tell him that Jesus is alive. When Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," we often think he's saying "Blessed are those who believe without any evidence," but he's not. He's really saying, "Blessed are those in the church who trust each other completely. Blessed are you who can turn to your neighbour in church, the very person taking communion with you in the pew beside, and say, 'What you're telling me is impossible, but I believe you; I trust you. Because I trust God, and God has brought me into communion with you.'"

The fact is that communities like the early Church have sprung up again and again through history, and it's not always a bunch of monks retreating from the world to a monastery in the desert, or a bunch of hippies going off to live in the woods together in a brightly painted bus. For example, the Bruderhof is a Christian group that is committed to living communally; everyone takes a vow of poverty and no one owns anything. They make most of their own food and clothing. But they don't hide from the world, they're very much in the world. If you need a car, you sign out one of the community cars; if you want to go have coffee with friends, you take some cash and keep the receipts. Their members work diligently on farms or in factories that produce wooden toys, school furniture, and medical equipment. No one takes home a paycheque, but meaningful work and sincere faith keep people motivated and accountable. It's certainly a strange way to do business, but so far it has worked. It works because there is trust: trust between members and trust in God. The director of one of the Bruderhof companies says, "If we always take the attitude that what's best for the community and for people's souls will ultimately be best for the business, God will take care of us. We trust in that and pay every day for our daily bread. We feel that the life that has been laid before us comes straight out of the New Testament, the words and life of Jesus. We have trust that if we keep to that course and help one another, we don't need to worry about the future."

These things *can* happen, to those who trust. Maybe we don't need to be card-carrying communists to be Christian, but if we can't believe that community like this could ever even happen, then it's a failure of our imagination it's a failure of our faith in Easter. "Do not doubt, but believe," says Jesus. But Luke points us back to the resurrection – believe *that* and just watch history unfold. You'll be surprised at what can happen.

And so, finally, it may be that we've stumbled into the meaning of that wonderful little psalm about the oil running down Aaron's beard. "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes." There are lots of good and pleasant things out there: raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens... Why on earth, when we want to illustrate how good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell in unity, do we point to oil dripping off a man's beard? And why the beard of Aaron, rather than, say, Moses or Elijah or Fidel Castro? There are lots of good beards out there: why did we go with Aaron, the High Priest? Well, because it's there in the Temple that true unity happens. It's there in the worshipping community where you find true *koinonia* – whether you call it fellowship or sharing or communion – or even communism. We are never closer to one another than when we are gathered in the Temple at worship, or for us, when we're gathered around the Lord's Table together. That's where true fellowship happens, when oil is spilling off Aaron's beard, or when the crumbs of the Communion loaf are being scattered across the table. Real fellowship isn't just an idea, it's something tangible. It drips off the beard; it's something you can even taste. As we gather at the Table today; let's make fellowship our feast.