

Person Centred Church – Person Centred Community

Acts 4:32-37 / James 2:1-13

What does it mean, or what is it like, when people live in community? When I asked that question this morning people said things like: “looking out for one another” “being safe with one another” “taking care of one another” “being together” “living together” “sharing things together”. It’s interesting isn’t it: all our immediate thoughts when we think of what being in community actually means come back to people. And the new testament Church clearly felt that way too: time and again in the New Testament letters we read of “one another” - “urge one another” “encourage one another” “teaching one another” “singing songs to one another” - (some of these may be more welcome than others!). And today I want to talk about the person-centred community.

Community – yuk!

I was once asked to take a wedding for a couple who insisted on using the 1662 prayer book. When I asked why, the groom said that he hated the word “community” which appeared in the preface to the modern service. I totally disagreed with this, and the various other reasons they put forward for choosing archaic and sometimes impenetrable language to express their most important personal vows in the company of many people who rarely otherwise went to church. However, I can see why a word such as “community” so easily elicits sighs and groans. So many community ventures begin well but then lose their way leaving behind a shell after the life has long since moved on. So often ideas of community come across laden with what we “ought” to do, heavily seasoned with guilt. And sometimes I just want to be private.

Nevertheless, community *is* something God calls people to. From start to end, the Bible envisions humanity in relationship. Time and again the issues and ethics of communal life are at the forefront of Biblical concerns. Over the past 30 years, the word “community” has become something of a political football, but looking at Acts Chapter 4, I want to ask, “what happens when “community” comes back to its intended goal and becomes truly “person-centred?”

Let’s take a look at this snapshot from Acts because here we see such a person-centred community coming into being. What does it mean for a community to be person-centred?

Community - Connected

First of all the members of this community are personally connected. So often you hear politicians or activists saying “we need to build communities” or “strengthen our communities” but none of this will happen until it comes from within – from the beating hearts of people who want to live together. At the same, over the past few years the role of the church in building the wider community has become increasingly realised. It lay hidden for years because we simply didn't shout about it or label it, but in fact the church is a powerful force for community building because it's natural state is to be a person-centred community rather than centred around a label or social crisis.

Some of you will have seen that amazing film “The Station Agent” - highly, highly recommended, gentle, quirky, feel-good comedy. It begins with the hero, who's a dwarf, going to his local railway society who meet, surprise surprise, at the back of a model railway shop. At that meeting his boss dies suddenly and Finbar McBride leaves town. There are no goodbyes. There was no real connection at that club – beyond their mutual interest in railways. But the church is intended to be so much more than simply people who are interested in Christ. We meet and exist person to person, person *for* person.

Community - Corporate

Second point: When the church is truly person-centred we naturally build community and it arises from the beating hearts of people joined together by the Spirit of Christ – we are corporate. In fact, it says of this early Jerusalem church, “**all the believers were one in heart and mind.**” (v.32) I can't believe for a minute that this meant they all thought or felt exactly the same – what we see here is deep, deep unity. They came from different backgrounds. Some were residents of Jerusalem, others were visitors. They had differing wealth and differing educations. This was an immediately diverse community, but right from the start their diversity revealed their deep, deep unity in Christ. They were, if you like, a body corporate – persons in unity.

Community - Centred

Thirdly, in the middle of this Acts community was Jesus. The Person at the Centre of the church community has to be Christ – otherwise it's not an authentic church but merely a religious club. We read in

v.33 that **“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them all.”** In other words, they could *feel* his presence and see his power - promised by Jesus before he went to be with the Father, (Acts 1:8). This wasn't mere talk, as if enough talk will conjure up the reality of your choice. They testified to something real - and God's power, here named as **“grace”**, was upon them all.

Earlier this week in his Inaugural Address, Barack Obama finished with the phrase, *“with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us”*. It was great to hear, but it sounded like a feel-good wish. We discover God's grace most fully as true *believers* in the person and presence of Jesus Christ. The people who gathered in that early church were **“believers”** - not in the modern sense of “believing in something or other”, but believers in Jesus. Obviously there was a range of faith: some would have been red hot in terms of believing; others would have been more wary, feeling their way. But the transformational reality of Jesus was what everything was about. And that's what I love about church – this church, and any other person-centred church – it's seeing people grow, change, be transformed, become more confident, become stronger, learn to pray, and pray together because we see and testify more and more and in different ways, to the real presence of Jesus, living in our midst.

Community - Collective

Fourthly, as a person-centred community, the early church in Jerusalem organised themselves as an economic unit. For centuries people have done this, and for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes it's simply in order to provide a stronger political unit. But here there seems no doubt that it was a compassionate response to community members: in v.34 we read, **“there were no needy persons among them.”** They saw themselves as one body – one family.

Now, it's often been noted by scholars that this little summary, by Luke, of the Jerusalem church is full of phrases and words which other Greek writers used to portray an ideal community. So did all this really happen, or is Luke imagining a golden age? I think we can get a clue from the Letter of James, which many recent scholars believe was written in the context of the early Palestinian church – possibly this one based in Jerusalem.

James was a fiery, political, community leader with a passion for justice burning on the fuel of vibrant faith – in fact most likely it was this that led to his murder. **“My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism,”** he says. In other words, because of the Person you have at the centre, pay attention to the persons on the periphery. James *urges* his listeners to attend to those in need as a *direct expression of their faith in Christ*. On the one hand, it's about honouring the glory of God in that person, while on the other hand it's about maintaining the integrity of God's church. If someone is suffering, the person-centred church *has* to respond because we're *one* body.

Community - Contributive

Fifthly, person-centred church is therefore contributive. We read in v.32 that **“no-one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had.”** Again, Luke's painting with broad brush strokes, with an amount of misty-eyed soft-focus maybe, but he captures the basic ethos of the church, and it was one with a history among Palestinian Jewish groups.

Most likely people joining the community at this level would place all their wealth in the common purse but for a period it would be held in trust so that if they wanted to withdraw they'd be able to get it back again. That's why in the next chapter Peter says to Ananias, **“After your property was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?”** So there would have been different levels of commitment, but the ethos for everyone was one of contributing. But the question comes down to *why* contribute? Why give money? Why come early to help with hosting on a Sunday? Why volunteer to help with Children's Church, go on the Easy Worship Rota, serve on PCC or help move pews after Friday Night Proposal?

The answer is that it's all about people. In a person-centred church it's not just about “keeping the show on the road” but it's about people: if you don't do it, who else will? And how will they feel if you're not there doing your bit? How will they fare? What happens to the people who always seem to catch everything that drops? Well, I'll tell you what happens: they become tired, jaded, cross, and sometimes they just give up. Do we want any of our sisters or brothers to be this way? Of course not! Everything we do, everything we contribute, whether it's money, time, energy, emotion, thought, will make a difference to people – and in a person-centred community that's the motive – consideration of others, whoever they are.

Community - Convicted

But, sixthly, how do we get the energy to do this? Does it all come from idealism or guilt? The world is full of idealists. One of the biggest selling singles is what I consider to be a dreamy, vacuous hymn to idealism - "Imagine" by John Lennon. Whenever I hear it I want to be ill – and it makes me angry too because dreams based on such naïve idealism are short-lived, leading often to spiritual and physical death. In fact it's an essential part of the romance of idealism that it has a tragic end, often seen as a sacrifice to the dark forces of this corrupt adult world.

But the Person-Centred church has a different kind of power. We read in v.34, **"From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as they had need."** Something moved these apostles, and the rest of the Book of Acts makes it clear it was the grace of God in their lives. They were convicted by the Holy Spirit.

At the centre of the Person-Centred Church are the three-in-one Persons of the Holy Trinity. So when we talk about person-centred community being a hall-mark of this church it's one based on, and powered by the activity of the persons in the centre. In order for *us* to be not only motivated, but powered for this community building, we need to return to the presence of the Living God. As St Paul said, **"The love of God compels me."** (2 Cor. 5)

Community – Communal Filling

In the person-centred church we don't need to be told we're a community. Nor do we "form a community" in order to get things done. We are community because God is community and our live together organically flows from God's life together. So in order to live more fully in that community, each of us needs, and together as a church we need, to be filled with the communal life of God.

Why don't we pray about that now?