

Sunday 9 April 2024, 1st Sunday after Easter, Parish Eucharist

Acts 4. 32-35

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'Perhaps the dominant vice of our time, from the point of view of the Church, will be proved to be Avarice. Surely there is something wrong in our attitude towards money. The acquisitive, rather than the creative and spiritual instincts, are encouraged. The fact that money is always forthcoming for the purpose of making more money, whilst it is so difficult to obtain for the purposes of exchange, and for the needs of the most needy, is disturbing to those who are not economists.'

These words were written in 1939 by T.S. Eliot, a man we may consider our near neighbour; he lived at No. 3 Kensington Court Gardens for the last eight years of his life. Eliot was a devout member of the Church of England and, along with C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, and other literary figures of his generation, contributed much to the development in post-War Britain of what we now call the Welfare State. Their thinking influenced Archbishop William Temple's 1942 treatise *Christianity and Social Order* in which he claimed, in summary, that the welfare state is an expression of Christianity in society. Faced with the potential breakdown of the world as they knew it, these Christian intellectuals were forced to ask themselves what, if any, contribution their faith might make to what came after. And the answer they all came to was a return to basics.

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.

From the beginning, the Christian faith as we see it recorded in the book of Acts, was a compassionate, generous, communitarian faith. Those who heard and believed the message of Jesus Christ risen from the dead responded in the only way they felt reasonable: with deep love and care for one another.

If we ask ourselves about the world we live in, how might we describe it? I have heard people say any number of the following: 'The world is at war.' 'The future doesn't seem happy.' 'I worry about the kind of world my children are growing up in.' 'I don't recognise this country anymore.' 'I'm afraid for the future; it all seems to unstable.' These reactions are not unlike those that occupied the minds of most people in the 1930s and 40s. In some ways, they are perennial problems. But I think I am right in saying that we feel these things more acutely now than we have for a very long time. How will we respond?

One response to instability and uncertainty is charted by Eliot: avarice, greed. We react against instability by trying our best to ensure our own stability. Money is the most obvious way to achieve this: we create a cushion or a buffer by hoarding resources. It may be a financial cushion squirreled away in the safest place we can manage, or it may be a lifestyle cushion that insulates us from what makes us uncomfortable and distracts us from the fear of what might lie beyond the horizon. We place our trust in acquisition, what we can get and hold on to. In so doing we insulate- and isolate- ourselves from others, creating what I'm sure you'll all recognise as another kind of problem. A society full of people all trying to ensure their own safety first is not

the kind of society where trust flourishes. It is also not the kind of society in which one is truly safe, because true safety depends on being able to trust others to help you when things go wrong, and to be in a position to receive the compassion of others when you need to rebuild. If everyone is a stone standing alone, where is the critical mass required to build a nation, a new societal structure?

The genius of the first Christians, inspired by the assurance of eternal life through Jesus Christ, was to build a mutually-supportive society by laying down their own excessive defences and their own stored-up gains for the good of each other. As the book of Ecclesiastes says,

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Knowing their immortal souls were safe in the arms of Christ enabled the early Christians to let down their defences and give sacrificially to each other, for the greater good. Understanding the great love God had for them in Christ caused them to well up with mutual love that was made manifest in sharing of possessions and money with the whole community. This was not the way of the culture in which they lived; the ancient Roman world was a dog-eat-dog, every-man-for-himself, get-what-you-can-while-you-can free-for-all, built on the back of slavery, oppression, and perpetual warfare. Come to think of it, it wasn't so different from our culture in certain respects.

That 21st-century Britain differs at all from that ancient pagan world is entirely down to the leaven of Christian charity and communitarian spirit working its way through society for centuries. And we are always in danger of losing sight of what we know is a better way when fear looms large on the horizon. As we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, let me remind you that fear is not the way to a good life. Fear locks us into our exclusionary silos. Fear separates us from each other. Fear drives away love and dampens generosity. Fear separates us and makes us vulnerable.

We may not be prepared as a parish community to sell all that we have and lay it at the apostles feet. We may not have the certainty to bring the proceeds of property sales or the dividends of investments to put in the offering plate which is every week presented before the altar of God and blessed in his name. But we have an opportunity- fresh every Sunday, every celebration of the risen Lord Jesus- to ask him for the strength to view each other with love, compassion, and genuine friendship. We have the opportunity to ask him to equip us to give generously to the needs of those immediately around us, to support each other's worship and our lives in this church, to set down our defences in order to be built up together. We are stronger together, stronger in love and for being loved. And though we may not be able to maintain our own St Mary Abbots welfare state, we can show our faith and our gratitude to God by ensuring the continued welfare of this church community so that all have the chance- equally- to know that they are loved by God in Christ and have a place in the Church, bought with his precious blood and assured by his resurrection of a better life forever in the heavens. Amen.