

Sermon Easter 5 Year A 2020

One of the most profound insights the writer of Genesis settled on is that we are made for community. In the opening pages of the Bible we find expressed the profound truth that we are made for each other. Adam finds his completion and fulfilment through his wife Eve. And both are shown to be made for God, designed to share life, happiness and joy in union with God. We are, according to God's purposes, made to be together. To separate us from one another is, then, inhuman. Cutting us off from each other is anti-human because such separation thwarts God's very design for us.

The Time of the Virus – as perhaps we might come to know this period we are living through - has thrust us into a deep struggle over God's plan and purpose for us. As people of faith we should note that there is serious contradiction at play in what we are currently experiencing. There is, for people of faith, something grating against what we know to be our God-given destiny. Yes, social distancing, isolation, quarantine, sheltering in place we know are policies aimed at preserving human life, and that their purpose is driven by a real compassion. A real sense of empathy – a Christian virtue if ever there was one – indeed accepts this cry for “lockdown.”

But empathy and care should not obscure the goal of our creation. The ease, apathy, or simple bewilderment with which Christians have embraced this sad time of separation suggests we may have lost sight of God's original plan for us. Yes, we must continue to heed legitimate governing authorities. Yes, we must continue to humbly accept what has been asked of us. And we do indeed thank God that it seems we have turned a corner and a path to restoration is now in sight. Still, we must struggle against the tide of drifting detachment. Yes, ours is the age of the individual. But our isolation and forced separation has started to rattle that. Coronavirus has highlighted to all of us in the way that no preacher, prophet or politician has been able to, on the limits of individualism. Here we all are - forced these past weeks into isolation – and the general sense is that this has been difficult, painful even, that *something is missing*. Some commentary would suggest the economy is the only thing that matters. But that really is the least interesting and least important impact.

Rather, the impact on human hearts, the impact on the fabric of communities, where the real toll is laid out. Our isolation has reminded us that happiness, fulfilment, mental (and spiritual!) health – our very stability and equilibrium – comes from *belonging!* The lie has been exposed that we're better off on our own, that we can do it on our own on our own terms. We are being reminded that we truly *do* need each other, that we are made for communion.

More than anyone, the church – of its very essence, of its very nature – should understand the truth: that God calls us into communion; that our hearts should long for community; that we belong to each other; that our deepest fulfilment comes through our shared life. The witness of the New Testament affirms in the strongest – and in an incredibly rich and varied way – this essential truth. The church does not appear as some sort of inconvenient afterthought – as is sometimes supposed: 'if only we could get to the pure, unspoilt faith of Jesus Christ we wouldn't have to put up with the complication of the church... I can worship God anywhere, who needs the church?... The church just gets in the way of my personal relationship with Jesus...' But I am afraid we cannot escape the *central* place the church enjoys in the record of Scripture.

From the earliest days the proclamation of the church was at the very heart of the proclamation of the Good News. And the many ways the New Testament writers speak of the church highlights just how important the concept was for them, and that the mystery of the church cannot be summed up in one, simple, neat formula. So, we see the New testament writers really *delight* in the variety: the church described as the Body of Christ, as the Vine and the Branches, as the boat on the storm-tossed seas of life, as the flock, as the bride of Christ, the New Israel. All the readings on this fifth Sunday of Easter show us in one way or another the centrality of the church in resurrection faith. Which makes perfect sense of course. Easter faith is all about restoring our communion with God. The first reading today from Acts shows the very careful and practical provisions which were put in place to ensure the church's ongoing life. And Peter tells us today in the second reading, the church is *a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart.*

We cannot escape here the communal dimensions of *race, people, nation*. In other words, our identity in Christ is one that is shared; faith is one which is held in common; what we seek to build in faith is done together.... We build a *spiritual house of living stones*. This idea is expanded for us in the gospel also. In the house mentioned by Jesus – the house to which he goes to prepare a place for us – is one of *many rooms*. In other words, this is a share house! In Christ, the dwelling place of eternity restores the lost communion of Eden.

For those tired with the empty claims that anything goes and that you're better off on your own; for those worn and weary of being isolated, well, the church offers the place of belonging, of communion. For those who have been sold the lie that the self and the individual is where true fulfilment and happiness is to be found, well the church, through its shared life, can show us that in fact the reverse is true. Christ has chosen us, this motley bunch of people; us, with all our failings, foibles, eccentricities and irritations, to be the vessels to realise this, to communicate this; chosen *us* to speak the profound truth that we are made for communion.

In this time some temporary measures have been put in place to help support our devotional life and to keep us in contact with the praying life of this church. But we must be sure these very things do not feed the insidious instinct to individualism. Yes, there *have been* blessings of providing these livestreamed services. But might some of us secretly prefer church from the comfort of our lounge room (or bedroom!) without the hassle of other people? Perhaps. But a far cry from the dignity of the church as witnessed in the New Testament. I *am* pleased that you are on the other side of the screen, that we can offer this and that you can share in it. But this *is not* the face of the future church. The face of the future church is what has always been these last 20 centuries: in community, in company, together. Our separation and isolation reminds us of the limits of our individualism. We might now start to hope that before to long we can again join together here. May that occasion remind us all that God designed us for community and *it is within the church* that this life of communion is most perfectly realised this side of heaven. Amen.