

Acts 4:32-35

John 20:19-end

The two passages that we've heard this morning from, Acts and John, contain so much it's quite difficult to decide which track to go down. I suppose to me they spoke of unity, sharing, fear, doubt, confidence, responsibility, hope – I could go on but to save your boredom threshold I won't!

In Acts we have a perfect example, of course, of Christian unity and sharing. There is a difference between Christian sharing and communism. Communism is stated to be ; a theory or system of social organisation in which all property is owned by the community and each person contributes and receives according to their ability and needs – which sounds not too far away from the model in Acts, but it actually means creating an "equal society" through an authoritarian state, which denies basic liberties.

This sharing shown in the birthing of a new church was voluntary. No-one was forced to give all their personal property but because of the unity brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit, in and through all of them, they were able to see where the need was and freely offer help.

They were truly one body so that had no problem with sharing with each other. This would, I suppose, take away any envy or feelings of worth through possessions, but would enforce a sense of worth in each other. I suppose this is how religious orders are conducted.

We would like to think that as Christians we could contribute to that sort of lifestyle I suppose, but on reflection imagine doing without things for a considerable length of time in order to fund a wonderful well deserved holiday in the sun, or to purchase a bigger home for a growing family, and then being made aware of a need within the community that would take all of your savings, apart from a weekend in Scarborough or a garden hut.

I would love to be able to truthfully say that I would have no problem – but I know that I would!

The thing is of course it wouldn't be just down to me, the whole community would contribute: verses 32-33 from the Message Bible.

The whole congregation of believers was united as one – one heart, one mind! They didn't even claim ownership of their own possessions. No-one said, "that's mine, you can't have it." They shared everything. The apostles have powerful witness to the resurrection of the Master Jesus, and grace was on all of them.

They were of one mind and heart because of the work of the Holy Spirit bringing complete unity.

There appears to be great unity among the disciples in the reading from John too, unified by fear, verse 19a, that evening on the first day of the week, the disciples we're meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders.

I do have a certain amount of empathy here. The disciples were in a strange place, they believed that Jesus was the Son of God but they had no idea of what was to happen next.

All they knew was that they were not at the top of the most popular people list to the Jewish leaders. The leaders had successfully (they believed) got rid of the ring leader of, in their eyes, this "insurgent" movement so what was to stop them getting rid of his supporters, in fact it made sense.

So, they were gathered together, confused, afraid, questioning and suddenly Jesus stood among them and they were filled with joy – suddenly all was well. A complete reversal of state of heart and mind.

This is the testimony of many today. People who have almost given up on life suddenly meeting with Jesus and witnessing to the overwhelming sensation of peace.

Suddenly Jesus was standing among them:
"Peace be with you," he said.

Meeting with Jesus does not mean that all our problems and fears will suddenly disappear as if by magic does it? The fact that Jesus appeared did not mean that they were suddenly going to be free of persecution – in fact quite the opposite.

We do people a big disservice if we encourage them to think that meeting with Jesus means life will become problem free.

Meeting with Jesus means the problems are still there but because of the work of the Holy Spirit as in verse 22:

Then he breathed on them and said to them, "receive the Holy Spirit" as he does with us, and we have suddenly got the strength and courage to tackle our problems without going under.

But of course the gift of the Holy Spirit is not just given in order that we will feel better, Jesus continues:

If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you refuse to forgive them, they are not forgiven.

What a responsibility – are you up to that?

When we pray, come Holy Spirit what is in our mind. What exactly are we praying?

We are praying that Jesus will bestow on us God's Spirit, and that can be a beautiful spiritual experience but it does not end there. By praying come Holy Spirit we are praying that we will be enabled to carry on the work of Jesus in the New Testament, today.

Not by encouraging us to form a holier than thou sort of place where people are afraid to enter, but a place of humility, forgiveness, sharing, healing and welcoming love. With no expectation of reward.

How amazing that God would trust us with this.
We who fall so short of perfection, like Thomas.

Verses 24-25

But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "we saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes. And stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

This reminds me of the reaction of members of my own family when I first began to attempt to witness to my new found faith. Not the exact same words as Thomas, of course, but a similar sentiment.

Jesus appears again to the disciples but this time specifically for Thomas.

What does this tell us? It tells us that Jesus did not turn his back on the one who doubted. Doubt can actually be very helpful if it leads on to more question, but it's not so helpful when doubt turns into stubborn disbelief. I think it was John Wesley who is reputed to have prayed, "Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief."

Thomas was convince. But Jesus said, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway."

We believe because we have met with Jesus through his Holy Spirit. We cannot convince anyone who refuses to believe without visual proof because even if Jesus did appear to them they would be convinced it was an hallucination or a trick of the mind.

But here's the thing – we are not to turn our backs on those people. When the Holy Spirit gives us the authority to forgive sins, this does not mean simply accepting an apology and moving on; It means blessing them, it means loving them, respecting them and accepting them, and if we have a problem with that regarding some people we would benefit by finding our own upper room and spending some time waiting on Jesus, so that he is able to breathe on us and we have the time to receive him.

And we remember that although Thomas has a reputation for being "doubting Thomas" it's believed that he ended his life as a martyr working as a missionary establishing a Christian church in India.

