



We are still the Early Church

This morning we started another 8 weeks of what we call [*Gospel Conversations*](#) – a chance before the service on a Sunday to meet downstairs in the church hall and read Scripture together, in conversation. In the past few months, we've read Luke's gospel, the Book of Revelation – and today we started reading the book of the Acts of the Apostles. It's the story of what happened immediately after Jesus's death and resurrection – and, if you'll pardon the pun, it's a hell of a story. Jesus left no plans, no policy documents or instructions for what was to happen next. In fact he didn't write anything down at all. What those men and women had was an unshakeable conviction that they had experienced a new and transforming presence of God – in the person of Jesus – and then accompanying in what they learned to call the Holy Spirit. Intangible, undefinable, ungovernable; an energising force for good - inspiring a new way of living and praying.

We are the inheritors of that first excitement – that emotional rollercoaster. They were just an ordinary group of people like us – with a variety of jobs, backgrounds, belief systems, political opinions. They were muddled, argumentative, passionate, and in the grip of something they thought worth sharing with other people.

Over the years we've made jargon out of this initial experience – we've institutionalised it – we've given ourselves job titles and role descriptions and the church as an institution has become rightly much more accountable to the legal, administrative, economic infrastructure of each society it is in. And we have budgets and policies and so on – and of

course we have to because we are employers and have obligations. This is understandable in a church that is also an institution.

But more worryingly, we've developed a jargon which is increasingly tribal - and distances ourselves from one another; evangelical, catholic, orthodox, radical, liberal. These labels are terrible. It seems that in the church, we love a good label. But they have the effect of what you might say is "othering" people: making them distant and different from us. Keeping us apart, making sure our label is better than their label. It has a toxic effect, born of our own insecurities. Our calling as Christians is simply to love God and our neighbour as ourselves. Our calling is to forgive as we have been forgiven, and remain resolutely unjudgemental, while still at the same time standing up for what we believe to be right in what can sometimes feel like not so much a hostile environment as experienced by those early Christians in Acts – but a totally indifferent environment.

None of this history should mean that we should lose the excitement of faith – the emotional content, the amazement, the grief, the newness of it all. Because, in the great scheme of things, in a planetary timetable, we are still the Early Church. Just 2,000 years old.

And so today I want to talk a little bit about how in our contemporary multi faith context, as thoughtful, passionate Christians, we might capture a little of that excitement and joy and what it might look like to try to share it.

And all this in the context this morning of baptising Rebecca, who followed our Camino course this year. Another member of the

Camino course – Sally – is her sponsor – a bit like a godparent for a grownup – and in a few moments we will baptise Rebecca and she will answer the fundamental question of faith – Do you turn to Christ? I turn to Christ.

And so that's the other context for this morning. Ask yourself that question: do you turn to Christ? Do you want to – or even want to want to – turn your feet in the direction of that way of living, which is Christ-shaped: open hearted, passionate, willing to give yourself away, rooted in love and forgiveness, willing to pray that God's will be done and mean it?

What could it mean for us as a church, collectively to do this; as a church that wants to live something – not just say the words – but live something. To capture something of that early excitement of the Acts of the Apostles? In short, the question I am asking us is how can we be evangelical?

Well, taking our cue from the apostles, I'd like to suggest three things to try:

- Build community
- Share your lived experience
- Don't be afraid of conflict

Build Community

This is such a challenge with a church like ours which is a gathered church – most of you travel here maybe 30 or 40 minutes on the tube or bus from somewhere in London – and some come from further. And there is so much more for us to do to help people get to know each other and relate on a deeper level than just saying hello to the people you already know over coffee. We are thinking about exploring small groups meeting monthly - either here at the church or in someone's home – to help us deepen our collective spiritual life. And our Quiet days, one was yesterday in Haggerston Priory – and our Gospel Conversations, our Camino course

(which runs from Advent to Ascension (December to May each year), our one off events, our Eucharists and daily Morning Prayers, our parish weekends and next year's parish retreat – are all part of us sending our roots more deeply into the eternal life of the Spirit – which is a radical thing to do.

In contemporary London, building community is hard – but is something that many people say they want. There are huge numbers of people living in London – including many here – who just don't know their neighbours. Community-building is a buzzword necessary in funding applications; a desirable outcome for all kinds of innovative projects – a bike repair project on an estate for former gang members, tattoo removal parties, tea parties for isolated elders, wellbeing classes, community magazines. We in the Early Church are about building community that is rooted in our shared desire to send our roots deep into the spiritual reality that is God, asking for the wisdom, energy and courage to live ever more deeply Christ-shaped lives together, and to learn to accept and love one another – in a city where so many are lonely in the crowds.

Share your lived experience

We have an amazing story to tell in the church of which St James's is a part. That God's presence is transformational in celebrating this Eucharist, a future orientated sacrament which holds before us a vision of a new future where all are fed, where all have enough and crucially where everyone, *everyone* is welcome; whatever you have done, however you are feeling, whoever you think you are or want to be. Without exception. This is counter cultural and radical. The fearless hospitality of God is echoed by our own attempts to be just as fearlessly welcoming. And so although I've said this many times before, in today's church, I can't say it too often enough: we are

followers of Christ who are unashamed of our diversity, unashamed of our complexity and our muddle and mess. We are God's broken-hearted people who nevertheless rejoice that we are together for Christ's sake; together as people who are poor or rich or strong or gay or divorced or in love or unemployed or overworked or grieving or survivors of terrible abuse.

"Inclusive" is another jargon label that loses its power with overuse. In today's church, it means that it's a church which thinks its gay-friendly. But I would hope that we are much, much more daring than that. That's a bit boring to be honest. Let's see what we can do together from that gospel base of inclusiveness, not just endlessly congratulate ourselves on something that's really obvious.

So, and this is my challenge to you: Tell others about this faith. The Christian public image is pretty appalling – we know that – but, honestly, get past it. I've said before – and I'll say it again – I know that many of you just don't tell people that you go to church because you're afraid of being categorised as a bigot. So tell people that there are communities like this. This is church: muddling along, not getting everything right of course – but totally committed to a radical inclusiveness, and a courageous hospitality – because that's what we find in the gospel.

Don't be afraid of conflict

I've been thinking a lot over the past week or two about the Labour Party's handling of accusations of anti-Semitism. I'm not going to get into party politics – although I have my own views about how it's been handled, as I'm sure everyone here has.

But I've been thinking about it for a few reasons. One is because we had a meeting this week of our Human Rights Pilgrimage group. You'll know that 29 of us travelled together to Berlin, Krakow and Nuremberg

this summer. As part of our journey together, we visited Auschwitz Birkenau. It was a profound experience, not easy to process or think about. The temptation is to try to neatened the experience, put meaning onto it, and make it simpler than it was. We don't have many words yet – but we are determined to try. Please come along on Sunday 23rd September when the group is going to show some pictures and talk about our trip. I know for myself I will never be the same again after visiting Auschwitz.

I've also been thinking about anti-Semitism because the specific issue for the Labour party has been over how it comments on the conflict between the State of Israel and the Palestinian territories. And this church has long been involved in that conversation too. We hosted a brilliant rabbi from the organisation Rabbis for Human Rights the year before last, which attracted some protesters, as did the Embrace the Middle East lecture we hosted last year, from an Israeli historian whose views are not acceptable to more conservative Israelis. And of course in 2014 we held a Festival of Bethlehem at Christmas. And although overall, the reception while noisy was positive, this church was, utterly wrongly in our view, accused by a few noisy activists, of anti-Semitism because of our challenge to Israeli government policy about the Wall, or Security Barrier.

What I am saying by using this as an example is twofold:

First; that Christians, not least because of our history as told in the Acts of the Apostles, have to be very, very careful in how we relate to our elder brothers and sisters in Judaism. We are inheritors of a profound holiness from our founders and inspirers in Judaism and we have an immense amount to continue to learn today.

But second, that fear of controversy finds no place in the Acts of the Apostles either and so if there are things we want to speak up about – for example, our asylum process in the UK, the situation of refugees, the suffering of our friends who are sleeping rough in the streets that surround this church building, the harm human beings are visiting on this planet – or any number of issues including political situations - in Syria where I was earlier in the year- or Israel/Palestine – then we will. There is a distinction here between good trouble and bad trouble. Good trouble is something any church should be in from time to time otherwise it's not listening to the gospel.

In these ways, I believe that we are, and must be, in a non-jargon sense, evangelical. How can we not want to share the good news that Christian faith is by its very nature radically inclusive, passionately committed to God's creation, and devoted to becoming more closely Christ-shaped in the way we live, invite others into that living. We want to be prophetic, joyful, and ready to be amazed – awestruck – as the gospel today and the Book of Acts has it – by the daily miracles we see in ourselves, in others, in the world around us.

This is in itself the operation of the Holy Spirit, infusing, provoking, unsettling, cajoling, challenging. Praying for this Holy Spirit is dangerous and will get us into trouble. But perhaps I can borrow and adapt one of my favourite sayings of that incredible 20th century human rights champion Eleanor Roosevelt.

A (church) is like a teabag. You don't know how strong she is until she gets into hot water.

Because if we're not careful church life, especially if we're fixed on the institution of it, can become something like this wonderful quotation from the contemporary writer Annie Dillard. It's with her words that I close.

"There is always the temptation in life to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends and meals and journeys for years on end. It is all so self-conscious, so apparently moral...But I won't have it. The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous...more extravagant and bright. We are...raising tomatoes when we should be raising Cain, or Lazarus."

— **Annie Dillard**

May we be true evangelists for the inclusive, joyful, forgiving presence of God in the world, and therefore regularly in hot water, brooded over as at Creation by the Holy Spirit, even while we remember the water at our baptism, cool and refreshing and life giving – today for Rebecca and for all of us. Amen.