

A lady went to consult her doctor for her weight problem. The doctor asked her whether she has the habit of working out. Vehemently, she replied, "Of course! I work out religiously!"

"How often is that?" the doctor queried.

And she replied with great feeling, "at Christmas and Easter!"

Why are these two days so important? It is because they culminated in God's redemption of humankind! Since it is Eastertide, let us concentrate on Jesus' resurrection. After all, the church is made up of people believing in the resurrection of Jesus. As St Paul said, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." (I Corinthians 15:13-14) So, how do we bear witness to this? In particular, how do we bear witness to this through our lives in this faith community?

To start with, let us revisit the first Easter Day. After Jesus' execution, the disciples were a frightened lot, fearing for their own lives. Although Jesus had more than once predicted his own death and stated plainly that he would be raised after three days, they were still deeply troubled and shaken by their beloved teacher's terrible fate.

Our gospel reading this morning tells us that the disciples met in a house and locked themselves in "for fear of the Jews". This house is very important in Church history. This was where the church had its birth, according to the gospel writer and the writer of the Book of Acts. This was where the Holy Spirit came and filled the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. But before that, this was where the resurrected Jesus appeared to them and brought them peace. Jesus made a very significant symbolic gesture. He breathed on them and they received the Holy Spirit. He then said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Such authority was not only given to the disciples, but also to the church. This group of people experienced the resurrection of their Lord. Was it that the Holy Spirit did not do anything before? Not really. Jesus mentioned the work of the Holy Spirit long before that moment. Still, Jesus' gesture was extremely significant at this point, as it marked the beginning of a new stage: This group of believers was becoming a new body of faith. They have experienced the peace of the risen Lord. They received the same Spirit that their Lord received. As a group, they were sent as their Lord was sent, not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. And thus, the Church was born; a new body of faith was formed. From a group of frightened and alienated people, they became a new body of exemplary life that bore witness to "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" (Psalms 133:1) This is an ideal life of spiritual vitality and Christian witness.

The reading from the Book of Acts described how the believers shared their possessions in the early church. The believers lived out a resurrected life: selflessness, kindness, goodwill and total trust in each other. No more is there meanness and hostility. No more is there the need of self-preservation. Only when a group of people treat each other with patience and kindness, and with trust and a generous heart, can we say that it is a community that has experienced their Lord's resurrection. This is what an ideal church should be like. This is what a community that has experienced their Lord's resurrection could be like.

There are two important aspects.

One of this is the change in heart and mind. What the church community must aspire to is such a change that is made possible only after encountering the risen Lord. How then do we do that? Is it even humanly possible for us to take the initiative? Humanity is separated from God because of sin, as our reading from John's epistle this morning points out. Yet, God has taken it into his own hands to make restoration of relationship possible. In fact, the Bible's central message is atonement. From the first stories in Genesis to the last visions of Revelation, it is everywhere apparent that God seeks to reconcile his people to himself and that he has provided a way to do so, through Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus, it is now possible for human to be reconciled with God. It is possible for human to be reconciled with each other. No more alienation. No more estrangement. Jesus has made it possible for human to be in communion with each other and with the Lord. This is the true meaning of the word "fellowship". This is the change that our hearts and minds must go through before we can really live as a faith community called the church. And we can take courage from the fact that this has happened before. Our reading from the Book of Acts tells us that when the church first came into being, believers were of one heart and of one soul, closely united in the bonds of Christian fellowship and love.

With this in mind, we can now look at the other aspect, which is the organisational side of the church. The reading from the Book of Acts notes the way believers spontaneously shared their possession with those in need. We can see this as a natural consequence of this union of hearts, and also, their putting into practice Jesus' teaching regarding stewardship of earthly possession. It is also helpful to note that many of the new converts in those first days of the early church came from abroad, and had out-stayed the usual hospitality, especially after they had decided to embrace the new Jesus religion. It was, therefore, natural and proper that they were cared for by fellow believers who were willing to share what they had. Surely it is the first Christians' union, benevolence, and liberality in supplying the needs of the needy, together with the apostolic testimony that helped to open the hearts of many and won them to the Saviour.

As Anglicans, we are fortunate to have a church organisation that we can be proud of. Nevertheless, we must stay away from the temptation of smug complacency. Being Christians does not mean that we are automatically immunized from human weaknesses. Here at All Saints', we are blessed with committed and capable church leaders and elected representatives to look after the day-to-day running of our church, and we have always taken part in supporting the needy through donations of time, food and money. Yet to make this church organisation fully functional, it still requires the joint effort of every one of us. On Good Friday, I saw a beautiful sight at the entrance of our church when I came in for the morning service. There, the youngest sidesperson was handing out the service sheet. Despite his tender age, he was doing what he could to serve the Lord and his brothers and sisters in the Lord. St Paul reminds believers that "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13) Indeed, the Spirit has endowed believers so as to fit them to be united in one, and to perform the various duties which result from their union in the same Christian church. Every member of the church, whatever their age, status or talents, has received their endowments from the same Spirit to serve the Lord and each other. Are we willing to put our trust in our Lord and aspire to go beyond our comfort zone to serve, as our Lord had come to serve? God is love. He is constantly doing good, so that his goodness may lead people to repentance. Are we willing to follow in his foot step as we venture along doing good and leading people to him?

May our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. Amen.