

Study following Sunday April 11th

Prepare: Think about times when you have lived with plenty, and times when you have lived with little.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for Jesus' radical message of service to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to the needy of the world.

Passage: Read Acts 4.32-35

Ponder: As we read about this early Christian community, I wonder how you have experienced Christian community. In Acts there were contemporary groups of people who believed in sharing possessions, but these early followers of Jesus were clearly inspired by the Old Testament story:

- Read Deuteronomy 15.4-11

I've heard it said that the key to successful community living is listening, listening to one another and to God. The early believers were clearly filled with God's Holy Spirit (see Acts 4.31) which empowers them to commit to supporting one another.

Although the believers 'had everything in common' it is also clear that some did retain ownership of certain resources such as fields and houses. This ownership allowed them to be able to choose how these resources were then shared at different times. It is thought that their sharing was not necessarily legal shared ownership, but the focus was on not 'claiming' resources as their own but using them to help those in need whenever they could. In verse 33 the author, Luke, attributes the lack of needy among them to God's great grace, and links together ministry to the poor with the preaching of Jesus' resurrection. This combination of service to the poor alongside prayer and preaching good news is also seen in a companion passage to ours that occurs two chapters earlier.

- Read Acts 2.42-47 and notice the similarities.

So, the early believers had a radical attitude that led to them holding their possessions lightly and seeing them as resources that were available to their needy brothers and sisters. This radical attitude then led to sacrificial action, as they chose to sell lands and houses in order to help others. Finally their radical attitude led to them entrusting their resources to the apostles, as they laid the money at the apostles' feet for them to make the best decisions about distribution. The 'laying at the feet' is an act of submission and trust in the apostles and their message. It is clear that the apostles continued distributing to the poor alongside their preaching and teaching. Only in Acts chapter 6 (verses 1-6) do the apostles seek to delegate this duty to others.

The radical generosity that we see from the first Christians is a real challenge to us in our times, as it has been through the centuries. In a way we are more aware of the many needs across the globe now, and many of us are more able to offer support through charitable organisations at just the click of a mouse. But perhaps more important is the growing awareness of needs much closer to home. I am very grateful to the work of the Lytchett Angels, who highlight such hidden need in our village and have enabled a way to support others without causing extra embarrassment or shame.

- I know many of us thought about our charitable support through Lent, but perhaps this passage is a reminder to keep seeking ways to share the blessings we have received with others in need.

Pray: Pray for all who struggle financially, especially due to the Covid pandemic. Pray that all of us would hold more lightly to the stuff we own, and be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit as to how we might bless others.

Stephen Partridge 2020 with reference to ideas from 'The message of Acts' Stott(1990).