

Ipswich Unitarians

CRITICAL MASS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT: NECESSITIES OF CHURCH LIFE

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Fifty days after Easter, according to Luke, writing in the Acts of the Apostles, about one hundred and twenty members of the 'Jesus community' were gathered in Jerusalem. "All these," we are told, "with one accord were constantly at prayer..." They included not only the eleven remaining male apostles but also, "a group of women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." (Acts 1: 14)

They seem to have been resolved to stay together as a group. They replaced Judas Iscariot with Matthias in order to keep the number of apostles at twelve – a symbolic representation of the tribes of Israel, the new Israel that Jesus had initiated. But although they were still together as a community, they were leaderless – a small Jewish sect whose charismatic leader was dead. The strange euphoria of the Resurrection experiences was, perhaps, beginning to fade. Maybe there was a sense that Jesus really had left them. The story of the Ascension may have something to do with this. Jesus had been, "lifted up before their very eyes", Luke tells us (Acts 1: 9). There is a promise that he, "will come in the same way as you have seen him go" (1: 11), but not when this will happen! People have been waiting for the 'second coming' ever since.

So those apostles and disciples gathered in Jerusalem may have been feeling rather deflated; confused as to what would happen next and what they should do. It is in John's gospel that a clearer message of reassurance is given. There, Jesus says: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another to be your advocate, who will be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth." (John 14: 16-17). The Spirit will, in some sense, be the returning Christ, in spiritual rather than physical form. "I will not leave you bereft;" Jesus tells the disciples in John's account, and then offers a profoundly mystical interpretation of what this means: "In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me; because I live you too will live. When that day comes you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you." (John 14: 18-20)

What we read in John's gospel – probably written early in the early 2nd century – is an account of how Christians of a later generation understood the experiences of their predecessors. And although Luke was writing earlier, this is true of his account too. Nevertheless, he probably knew people who had been present at that Pentecost, when something happened to dispel the confusion and uncertainty that had descended on the 'Jesus community'. What Luke gives us in Acts may not be a strictly literalistic report of what happened, but he does give us an account of a spiritual experience shared by the whole group, an experience that was of seminal importance.

Here was the Breath of God descending upon them, entering them, and speaking through them. Here, indeed, was the Spirit that had filled Jesus and which now filled them, the renewed body of Christ on earth. And this is how those early Christians saw themselves – as vessels of the Spirit, giving it flesh and blood and physical form, just as Jesus had done. And it was their mission to be channels of that Spirit to all humanity; to bring into their community people of all kinds, united in love for God and their neighbour. It was to be a universal commonwealth that would anticipate and hasten the coming of the Messianic Kingdom, both to human hearts and to the world. This was – and is – a powerful motivation, as we can sense in the excitement evident in Luke's account of Pentecost and in the profound spiritual reassurance of John's version.

Luke was one of the companions of Paul, whose understanding of the gospel had a wider vision than some of the original disciples were happy with. In Luke's account of Pentecost in the Acts

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of the Apostles, we see the Pauline universalism that reaches out beyond the Jewish people – and beyond the bounds of gender and ethnicity – to address all humanity, to invite everyone to the Messianic banquet, without them having to go through any outmoded ritualistic preliminaries. Although the Jerusalem crowds addressed by Peter would have been Jewish, albeit assembled from all over the known world, he also says: “The promise is to you and to your children and to all who are far away, to everyone whom the Lord our God may call.” (Acts 2: 39)

It is a matter of historical record that the Christian faith did spread rapidly across the Roman Empire and beyond. And, as it did so, it diversified, with various interpretations arising and coming into conflict, until one became dominant and took over the Empire that had once persecuted it. But all that was well into the unimagined future on that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. What followed more immediately was the forging of a new institution, with leaders, procedures and simple doctrines derived from Jesus and his revolutionary re-interpretation of Judaism. There were, as yet, none of the theological conundrums that would bedevil, distract and divide the Church in later centuries. It wasn't a creed that united them, but a Spirit that no creed could adequately capture or express. And that Spirit was, above all, about love – love in all its true manifestations.

The religion of love replaced the religion of commandments, of law, because it rendered them superfluous. Every commandment, wrote Paul, is “summed up in the one rule, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love cannot wrong a neighbour therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.” (Romans 13: 9-10)

A community that, potentially, could include everyone without distinction of race, gender, class, ethnicity, religious background, and all the rest; a community that affirms human equality; a community committed to kindness, honesty and merciful justice; a community founded on love, the supreme gift of God, and on the liberty that negates all the bonds that keep the human body and soul enslaved: this is what was – and is – on offer. And it seems to me to be the sort of community of which we would want to be a part – and which, indeed, we would want to be.

This has nothing to do with theological nitpicking; nothing to do with obscurantist doctrines or fundamentalist obsessions with the letter of scripture; nothing to do with the imposition of ‘orthodoxies’ and exclusive creeds. Personal understandings and expressions of faith will inevitably vary, but where the Spirit dwells, bringing love to human hearts, the greater unity will prevail over the petty differences.

But, of course, churches are composed of human beings. This means that we sometimes – oftentimes – struggle to live up to the best that we know! And that is why churches sometimes fail to be what they profess to be. And it is why they sometimes fail altogether. And there's nothing new about this, as we know from the New Testament itself.

In the opening chapters of that remarkable document, the book of Revelation, we find a letter addressed to the ‘seven churches of Asia’. The letter was, we are told, written under the direction of an angel, who in turn is the mouthpiece of God: “These are the words of the One who holds the seven stars in his right hand...” (2: 1). In fact, what we find is a glimpse of seven church communities, each struggling with its own problems, both internal and external.

The church at Ephesus is praised for its hard work, its endurance, its determination not to be seduced by bogus “apostles” and other “wicked people”. But it is not all good news. Maybe their determination not to be misled has damaged them spiritually. They are told: “However, I have

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this against you: the love you felt at first you have now lost.” (2: 4) No matter how theologically correct, how zealous, you are, what matters is that you don’t lose the love on which the community was founded.

The church in Smyrna, clearly suffering under hostility and even persecution, is reassured: “I know how hard-pressed you are, but in reality you are rich. I know you are slandered...Do not be afraid of the sufferings to come.” (2: 9-10).

The church in Pergamum is also having a hard time: “...you are holding fast to my cause, and did not deny your faith...even at the time when Antipas, my faithful witness was put to death in your city.” But there is a rebuke too: “...I have a few matters to bring against you...” (2: 13-14). These had to do with the controversial issue of eating meat that may previously have been offered in pagan sacrifices.

The church in Thyatira also gets both praise and blame: “I know what you are doing, your love and faithfulness, your service and your endurance: ...of late you have done even better than you did at first.” (2: 19). But they have rather blotted their copybook by tolerating, “that Jezebel, the woman who claims to be a prophetess.” (2: 20)

So far the churches have been praised even if they have also been criticised, but the church in Sardis gets a real dressing down: “People say you are alive, but in fact you are dead...” Here is a community that seems to have lost the breath of life, the spiritual power necessary for survival. The letter continues: “Wake up and put some strength into what you still have! For I have not found any work of yours brought to completion in the sight of my God.” (3: 1-2) Here is a church in danger of packing up altogether. It has lost its way entirely, with members lacking in conviction and commitment. It would not be the last!

The church in Philadelphia, though, is rather different: “I know your strength is small, yet you have observed my command and have not disowned my name.” (3: 8) A small church is always in danger of lacking the critical mass that is necessary for survival. A church must have a sufficient core of people who have not only the capacity and the commitment to maintain it, but also the conviction and the loyalty to keep it spiritually vibrant, the love to make of it a true and caring community that practises what it preaches. The church in Philadelphia may have been small, but its faithfulness outweighed this and gave it what it needed to maintain critical mass, and so the potential to grow as well.

The last church to be addressed was that in Laodicea. And they really seem to have got up someone’s nose! Why? Because of their utter wishy-washiness; their failure to generate any enthusiasm about anything! “...you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either cold or hot! Because you are neither one nor the other, but just lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.” (3: 15-16) Here is a church that is dying of apathy. Its members are self-satisfied and complacent, concerned only with their possessions and their status: “You say, ‘How rich I am! What a fortune I have made! I have everything I want.’” (3: 17) It is a church where the Spirit is no longer heeded and so is no longer present.

I think there are lessons for our congregations today in all these words from nearly two thousand years ago. The positive judgements, the mixed judgements, and the negative ones too, apply to many congregations in diverse denominations – including our own – in this 21st century. It is not for me to point any fingers, of course, so let me end as the author of Revelation ends: “You have ears, so hear what the Spirit says to the churches!” (3: 22)