

## **NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**

**SUNDAY 15 MAY 2011**

**Rev. Deacon Jenny Preston**

**Acts 2: 42-47; John 10: 1-10**

### **“Powerful Witness”**

Children on a play date pool their toy collection together and prepare to build an imaginary town. Adults share a meal at a restaurant and, when the bill comes, each makes a contribution and are grateful for the time together. Beyond these daily experiences of sharing, one can think of the more extraordinary acts of generosity that happen after disasters like Black Saturday, the Christchurch earthquake, our Australian floods and the multiple disaster in Japan when individuals and communities extend themselves to address the needs of others. Yet the world-view presented by many news accounts is one of self-preservation and greed. Given the meaning and identity most cultures place on personal ownership, it can be difficult to imagine nurturing self-giving and community.

The earliest expressions of the Christian faith often seem remarkable. Acts 2 invites us to see hospitality and generosity reflected within ourselves and this community of which we are a part. This morning Deborah gave us a picture of the early church, which tells us a truth: Deborah demonstrated God’s hospitality, which has been a hallmark from the days of the early church: a welcoming into the fellowship, of teaching the truths of the Way of Jesus, of praying and sharing meals. (Acts 2: 42-47).

It’s possible to take this description of the early church community in different ways: is this the ideal to which we might strive? Is this the church at its fullest and purest? One immediate point is that in the memory of Luke, looking back forty years, it was not that the church was so much engaged in active evangelism, that is, the sort of preaching like Peter undertook on the day of Pentecost. The early church was engaged in mutual care and worship.

People have devoted books to arguing that the early church was untainted and uncorrupted by human tradition, and urge - let’s get back to that model, with communal living and giving. I used the word ‘idealistic’ about this passage from Acts, not just because all the authorities do, but because it’s important for us, twenty centuries later, to understand that, right in the Books of Acts, in between the summaries that describe with a joyful exuberance the rapid growth of the early church, there are those stories of very real, very human differences and conflicts.

The early church had to deal with that very important question of whether to let the gentiles in on this good news. That was a REALLY big problem that required a special council, in Jerusalem, lots of work on Paul’s part, and a very dramatic dream for Peter to get the message that God’s plan included all of God’s children. And then there were some other problems, right after Luke says that everyone shared what they had, two people were found to have held back some of the profits on the sale of their property. In a very dramatic story, each drops dead when confronted with what they had done. This must have caused at least a little talk in the church afterward.

John Dominic Crossan gives ample evidence to suggest that the early Christians did practice communal sharing, which in some instances led to internal conflict & Bill Loader reminds us that some Greek and Roman philosophers mused about such ideal communities. It’s very probable that at least some Christians in Jerusalem did as Luke suggests. It may have been an unrealistic ideal, and

after a few years left some badly exposed without resources. Perhaps these were among the poor for whom Paul agreed to make collections.

We have, over past centuries, had examples of Intentional Christian communities, where groups of radical Christians have bought property in common, and lived shared lives. In the Banyule area there is a group of three households who are still successfully practising communal sharing of property and goods. Shane Claiborne, the guest speaker at the last National Christian Youth convention held here in Melbourne, leads another community in North Carolina. His community is called "The simple way", and is in an inner suburb called Kensington. The community has found innovative ways to challenge the degradation of the inner city, pooling their economic resources among fellowship community members and the needy, and offering hospitality to strangers. They are committed to peace-making, care for the environment around them and regular contemplation.

Sometimes, the most powerful witness of the Christian community is in the testimony of the way it conducts its life together. Our weekly service order tells that we are – just like the early church, a worshipping, learning and serving community. I think we may like to add a word to our self-description: a people of grace, or a people of good-will. Why do I say that? Recall ourselves on the 13<sup>th</sup>. February when we first gathered together as the North Balwyn Uniting church, a pilgrim people on the way forward to the amalgamation of the congregations of Trinity and St. Aidan's. We acknowledged that many of us look back to the glory days of the 50's and 60's when the pioneers of this district, and their growing children, led very church-centred lives – in the Sunday school, youth groups, the Fellowship and cricket club, the gymnasium and the choirs.

The reading for that day was from Deuteronomy 30: Moses, speaking to the people of Israel, was placing before the people two choices – to choose life – being attuned to the Word of God, and to continue as God's Pilgrim People, and that our choice is to choose to keep on living a godly life, and being godly people in this part of Melbourne.

Last Wednesday was the penultimate meeting of the Interim Trinity church council: the meeting received and accepted the Annual Report for 2010, and the audited balance sheets: The atmosphere in the meeting, in the home of Ivan and Jeanie, was one of *goodwill*. An atmosphere of being close to the next step on the journey. The meeting also agreed to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by which the Hanbit Korean Uniting Church of Box Hill will be using Trinity for worship for the next two years, while their church is having a total transformation.

Luke puts great emphasis in today's passage from Acts on fellowship, breaking bread together and sharing meals. We've already begun that process -- like welcoming a fiancée into the family --- getting to know and understand each other takes openness, patience and acceptance, -- offering each other God's hospitality, God's welcoming and comforting love, shown through a cup of tea, or chocolate cake, or being alert to someone standing alone, or recalling their recent joy or sadness.

Next Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup>. May, we'll have Revs Sue Withers and Robert Elkhuisen here for an after-church chat: they'll invite us to respectfully share comments about the process – perhaps how we're not sure whether we have the same elder, or we haven't caught on to the system for stewardship envelopes, or whether there is an invitation to join the Tennis Club. And an opportunity to mention any sadness or joy we're experiencing.

On 24<sup>th</sup> May, the pastoral care groups of both former congregations will begin the task of planning a way in which we will endeavour to be companions to each other – ways in which we can share the sweet and sour bread of daily life. Then on Saturday week, our representatives will tell the Yarra Yarra Presbytery Meeting of the steps which the two congregations have taken over past months,

and will seek the approval of the Presbytery, for the two congregations to formally become the North Balwyn Uniting church, residing in Balwyn North.

There'll be two wee church council meetings on the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup>. May, when the separate books will be closed, and the new body will step forth from its various mantles, and emerge into the June sunlight hopeful, trusting and moving confidently forward to a place where we will all grow and thrive as people; a place of abundant life.

Abundant life is a shorthand message in today's gospel reading: unpacked, it brings us to the centre: God's will and intent. For John that is rooted in God's love. God's being in love, in love, in relationship, is the source and pattern for a vision which might include all of creation in such unity. Globalised, it engages us in a vision which embraces diversity and difference, and has no place for exploitation and marginalisation.

Whether we are really aware of it or not, we are each living in God's abundant life: as followers of the Way of Jesus we are in relationship with God, being sisters and brothers to each other in this newly emerging North Balwyn Uniting church...