

Being a risk-taking church

Acts 4.32-35 / 1 John 1.1-2.2; John 220.19-31

I want you to think quickly what one word comes into your mind when I say 'parish'. Just one word. Now do the same thing – what is the one word that comes into your mind when I say 'church'?

I think it is unlikely that many will have thought of the same word. For some the word 'parish' means a geographical area on a map – maybe nothing to do with the church at all. That isn't true in towns, of course – in villages they don't have town council, but a *parish* council. On 'church' some of you may have thought of a building, some of you of the community, or of the faith – these are seemingly easy words, but actually quite difficult to handle because we all hear different things. Your different answers aren't right and wrong, of course – they are all valid answers to the question. Becoming an effective parish or church is about sharing those perceptions and ideals. But then I believe it is also being prepared to abandon them, if that proves appropriate. One of the challenging words we need to consider is 'risk'. I want to explore that a little with you. I am going to read a poem – actually a hymn - written by the great United Reform Church hymn writer Fred Kaan, and then we will see what we can glean from the three lessons we have just been hearing. The poem goes like this:

O God of the eternal now,
why is your Church so slow
and lacks the will to venture out
where you would have us go?

If, Lord, it is our love of ease
by which we thwart your plan,
then stir us up, unsettle us
and lead us by the hand.

May we with courage take the risk
and leave the past behind,
to be a people on the move,
throw caution to the wind.

Give us the heart of Abraham,
for changes make us bold;
and bless us only so that we
in turn may bless the world.

He calls it 'A hymn on Abrahamic faith' – but it applies to any kind of faith which takes seriously the idea of trusting God, and taking risks – not marks of the Christian community in many places at many times – but certainly marks of the Christian community when it has been at its most effective. You

have to consider to what extent you as an individual, and this community of St Laurence has been able to take risks, or whether we have been thwarting God by our love of ease.

Let's turn to our three readings. The picture of the early church in Acts is so idealistic that it is hardly believable. At least it would be if we imagined that it carried on behaving the way we heard about then – do you remember that image of them all being the best of mates, totally united and committed to each other and the cause – giving up their personal possessions, sharing so generously that they even sold their houses so that the poor in the Church could have what they needed. Thinking that was how it *always* was might come from reading that out of context. But in the very next chapter we read about real internal problems – Ananias and Sapphira not quite playing the game properly, and ending up dead. If you have forgotten that story, read it in Acts 5 – it follows on from today's reading. The total story of the New Testament is that such close community living did not continue. To be authentic Christians, we don't have to be like that – but nonetheless, there are some principles there which we can take hold of very usefully. Their primitive communism might not have survived, but the idea that church has demands on us as individuals should. If we are part of the family of faith, we are just that – and in the same way that blood families have rights to make demands on us which friends do not – blood being thicker than water and all that – then the family ties of the brothers and sisters of Christ, the children of our heavenly father ought to be demanding. If church ties are weak, and our sense of belonging to each other is weak, then the church as a whole is weak. But it is risky to move from living with one set of family ties to two sets. The picture also shows a church that really cares about each other. They know each other well, and know each other's needs. That isn't often the case in modern churches. People are very private. They may not even know each other's names, let alone their jobs, or their family circumstances. Opening ourselves up to knowing and being known more is risky – and is often more easily done in smaller groups than in whole communities. The picture in Acts is of a people living on the edge – risk-taking with each other for the sake of loving God and neighbour.

Let's move on to our reading from the first letter of John. This comes from much later in the New Testament era, when things had got very complex, and the church was being torn apart by people who thought they knew better than the apostles, and led people astray in their beliefs. John writes this letter, he says, so that he and the community he is writing to can have fellowship with each other and with God, and that they will have joy. Now we needn't on this occasion worry ourselves about the particular issues that he was tackling – but that purpose is a very good one to think about. In fact it follows on very closely from that primitive picture we gained from the reading in Acts. The word for holding things 'in common' – κοινά - is almost the same as the word used by John which we heard translated as 'fellowship' – κοινωνία. Ultimately is a word about being 'bound together' – as we sometimes sing in the hymn 'Bind us together Lord with cords that cannot be broken'. What had been

a very material sharing had broadened into a much wider and deeper state of belonging to one another, being totally involved with one another. It is the idea which we sometimes use in the liturgy when we say at the peace ‘Let us pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.’ It is a challenge to that individualism that has been the bane of much of Western Christianity, and particularly protestant Christianity. Of course we are people who have fellowship as individuals with God, but we also are in fellowship with each other, and together with him. You can sometimes get a litmus paper test by checking which expression you use most often – ‘our church’, ‘my church’ or ‘the church’. We are beginning to get some sense of *κοινωνία*, the common life, when we most naturally think in terms of ‘our church’. So we are bound to each other, and bound to God. But we are also to be people of joy. We need to get away from being serious in the wrong sense. As I keep on saying – Christianity is much too important to be taken seriously – it has to be taken joyously. Now in all this, I think John is also calling us to be people who take risks. It is risky to have real fellowship with other believers, or with God – you never know what that might lead to. It is risky to let go, and let God. As C.S Lewis put it – ‘Joy is the serious business of heaven.’

Then our Gospel reading – what a fascinating story that is, if we approach from the perspective of risk-taking. It starts with the disciples taking no risks at all – they are hiding behind locked doors. And despite their efforts to avoid risks, Jesus explodes them – there may be locks, but they cannot keep him out. And that is the experience of the Church, thank God. Despite the many things we have tried to do, we can’t keep God down, and he keeps on exploding our complacency and fearfulness and reticence. And in the story what happens is that he *empowers* them. They receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which transforms them. Think of the change from the situation in the Gospel to the situation we hear about in the reading from Acts. In the space of a few weeks, they have changed from being this frightened crew behind bolted doors, to being the public group of people prepared to sell their houses for the sake of the common life that we heard about. That it happened at all is amazing enough. That it happened so quickly is testimony to the power they received that day when Jesus appeared in the room with them. He not only *empowers* them, he also gives them *authority*. That doesn’t mean dogmatism and hierarchical rules. It means he gave them such *confidence* in what they were doing that things were able to move on for them as individuals, and for the company of which they were part – the embryo church – in a staggering way. But again, it isn’t a picture painted in rosy tints. It includes the story of Thomas, who couldn’t believe what they told him. He comes to it all from a different perspective, and has to run along after the others. That seems to me to be a reminder of the fact that although Jesus empowers and gives authority, he continued to take risks with these followers of his. They might get it wrong – as we heard in the reading from John, some of them did. They might not all be as convinced as others. But he was prepared to put the whole enterprise into their hands. It would stand or fall by what they managed to do. God continues to take risks with us, and asks us to take risks with him – as they did. They couldn’t *know* in some provable way in advance what was going to

happen when they unlocked those doors. But they took the risks – and that we are here today is down to the risks that God took with them, and they took with God.

And that is the challenge for us as a Parish – are we are prepared to be like them, in accepting the risks God takes with us, and risking things for him? Our readings are a record of what happened when others took risks. It wasn't all plain sailing. They got into some difficulties. But the God who took risks with them honoured the risks they took with him – and the result was that the faith of eleven men became the faith of thousands, if not millions, within a lifetime. Why are we so unwilling to believe that the same can happen in *our* day. It is an adventure of risk-taking which we all need to embrace in some way or other – just what way, we have to listen to God, and to each other, in real fellowship, real *κοινωνία*, to decide.