

by Canon Adrian Daffern

Becoming a Pentecost people

Acts chapter 2: verses 42 to 47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

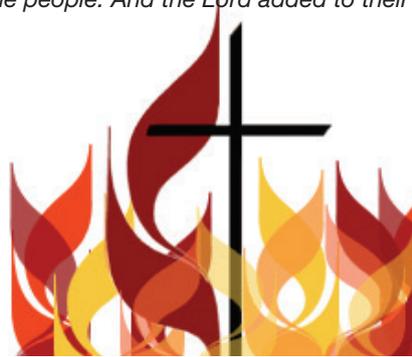
Community is one of those words which gets hugely over-used these days, not least by clergy and politicians. It has become one of those buzz words which gets irreparably weakened by being applied in the most inappropriate and, frankly, bizarre contexts. *Private Eye* even had a column once devoted to celebrating some of the most cringeworthy examples.

In Scripture we learn that the first Christians sought to live in community, in this passage from Acts 2, Luke gives us a wonderful description of what a truly Christian community looks like. It serves as a useful, and challenging, reminder to us of what we are called to be. Which is what? If we take Acts 2 seriously, it means being committed to worshipping together, living open and generous lives, ready to welcome others who are attracted to our way of living.

Christian communities worship

Luke lists four key worshipping activities of the early Christians, and puts them into pairs: the apostles' teaching and fellowship; the breaking of bread and – literally – the prayers. The apostles' teaching (*didache*) may have been a mixture of formal teachings and informal sayings, and the apostles' fellowship (*koinonia*) can be read in a variety of ways, encapsulating the togetherness and common ownership that verse 44 speaks of. The breaking of bread may well have begun to formalise into a Last Supper meal by now, and the use of the definite article and plural for the prayers seems to imply something more formal: some have suggested the use of familiar Jewish prayers including the psalms – and even the use of the Lord's Prayer and newly-formulated Christian prayers and hymns.

• *Are our communities – our churches – truly characterised by this kind of*



Spirit-filled worship? Can we recognize what we do when we gather together for worship as being part of this tradition?

Christian communities share

It is really interesting to see that the first Christians, like many similar groups in the ancient near East, were beginning to live in ways that we would now recognise as monastic: not holding on to personal possessions, but giving everything up to a common ownership, and a common purse. They went further: they gave away the results of sales of property and possessions to others, according to their needs. We're not told how this worked in any kind of structured way, but it would seem from Acts 2 that there were no heavy regulations or expectations imposed on believers – their response was one not of law, but of love.

• *Some Christians today are inspired by these texts to do just the same, those in religious communities and those living in the secular world. Are our communities – our churches – truly characterized by this kind of generosity? Can we recognize the way we treat our possessions as being part of this tradition?*

Christian communities grow

God blessed the life of the first Christians by adding more to their number, day after day. But is it any surprise that people were attracted by this group of Spirit-filled

believers, with their 'glad and sincere hearts', full of joy, and popular as a result? They responded to the preaching of Jesus' resurrection by allowing their lives to be changed – radically changed – discovering joy afresh as a result. Is it too much to hope for that we might be the same? Not wearing painted-on smiles, falsely happy, denying the all-too real pains and problems that assail us. Rather, displaying the joy that comes from knowing that Christ is alive, and that, through his death and rising, everything is changed, for ever?

• *Are our communities – our churches – truly attractive to those outside our fellowship? Can we recognize ourselves when we read of our forebears in the faith?*

A Pentecostal Community

The first Christian communities were truly Pentecostal – they were born out of the apostles' experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2: 1-13), and from Peter's inspired preaching of the Gospel of the Resurrection (Acts 2: 14-41). Luke tells us that 3000 were baptized as a result of these experiences.

I wonder if it is fanciful to suppose that the same kind of results might be evident if we behaved more as they did?

• *Let us pray that our studies of these texts might so inspire us to be truly a people of Pentecost, and that our communities – our churches – might be places where, should members of the early Jerusalem church so wonderfully described in Acts 2 find themselves visiting us today, would feel immediately at home. And not only them, but all those whom we seek to serve, in the communities that lie beyond the doors of our churches.* **r**

about the writer

The Revd Canon Adrian Daffern is Team Rector of the Benefice of Blenheim, Oxfordshire. He has served in three parishes in the Diocese of Lichfield as Curate, Team Vicar and Vicar; as a minor Canon of Lichfield Cathedral; and, between 2003 and 2010, a Residentiary Canon of Coventry Cathedral. He is married to Megan, who is Chaplain of Jesus College, Oxford.