Sermon Notes Easter 4 2023 – Rev. Jonathan Pinkney

In the weeks of Easter we are experiencing the witness of Christ resurrected and hearing the stories of appearance.

In these weeks we read passages from the book of Acts in place of our readings from the Hebrew bible, and we do so to follow the story of God’s people establishing God’s Kingdom of Earth and asking the question: what does being a Christian look like?

In these first days of Christian life, I was taught to refer to the people of this time, not as ‘Christians’, or the ‘Early Church’, but as a community of ‘Christ believing Jews’.

The apostles like Jesus held a Jewish identity and it is a process of discovery and a journey by which they come to form their own communal rules of law, discerning that Jesus came to teach us that while he himself was Jewish and abided by Jewish law, that some of the principles he taught meant that some Jewish law was no longer required.

I’m going to work backwards in a sense and talk about the book of Acts as a whole, who was involved, and how this new culture was established; before talking about the readings from Acts that we read today, and the others we read in the Easter season.

Christ believing Jews definitively make these key decisions of establishing a new culture and identity at what is known as the Council of Jerusalem.

And we have two key figures at the center of these monumental gatherings.

The first figure is who read about at Easter in Acts: Peter leads the apostles, the Christ believing Jews in the early days of Christian witness.

Jesus before his death instructs Peter to build his Church. He lays hands on him and passes on the responsibility of sharing God’s good news to the world.

The second figure is Paul the evangelist. We read Paul’s letters throughout the New Testament, but the book of Acts documents his movements, his ministry and persecution, his trials and time in prison.

In Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas, come down from Antioch to Jerusalem and meet with the elders and apostles at a time when these decisions are made.

So, the key things that were addressed at the Council of Jerusalem were the two most culturally significant identity markers of being Jewish in that time.

The first was dietary law, and the second was circumcision.

While the Christ believing Jews were living as Jesus had, to Jewish law, people who lived outside of the areas of the Jewish people who were referred to as the ‘Gentiles’, were not.

And the questions of Christian identity and the need to conform to Jewish culture were quickly asked.

So, it isn’t clear whether Paul is present at the first meeting of the Jerusalem Council, where Peter shares a vision that he has concerning dietary law, where he tells the apostles: “the Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us”.

And then at the second meeting, where Paul is named as being present, they decide that circumcision is not something that will be required to be a Christian.

Peter refers quite boldly to this identity marker as a burden, he says: “why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10)

Instead 3 things are given as Christian identity markers: the grace of God being with us, salvation through Jesus Christ, and baptism.

Now those are the events in Acts, but Paul does tell of another meeting, specifically with Peter who visited him in Antioch. Paul writes to the Galatians that he reprimanded Peter and opened his eyes if you like to the need for Christian unity beyond Jewish identity.

And Paul says to the Galatians that Christians are identified through their ‘faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal 2:16)

And he says that the things that bear Christian freedoms are the gifts of the Spirit, a shared identity of persecution and a blessing from God.

There were other key apostles in the early Christian world who established what the community of Early Christians looked like, Philip, Andrew, Stephen, Mark, Thomas, and others.

But really without these moments, these key decisions with Peter and with Paul, things would have looked very different and would have got fragmented very quickly. And the book of Acts serves to pass on the Christian movement from Peter and the apostles, to highlight Paul’s ministry and his travels far and wide.

Just very quickly on the letters accredited to Peter that we read through the season of Easter, these were actually likely from the Early Church in the second century, more than 100 years after Peter lived.

But their purpose was to tell Peter’s story and interpret a theology that aligns with his ministry and his experience.

From 1 Peter this morning, and from Paul and other places, we are given the identity as Christians through persecution. It’s actually something that comes through loud and clear from the Early Christians is that something that identifies Christians is being judged and rejected for our faith, and of course historically, and today in some places in the world, Christians are abused, injured and put to death for believing in Jesus Christ.

It's hard to stand in West Vancouver and preach a sermon about persecution when many of us, myself included can rarely speak of times where being Christian has put us in danger or caused us harm. That may have happened to some of us, and if so, there is great inspiration from scripture in how that experience holds value in God’s eyes, and how we can experience solidarity in Jesus’ own experience and the promise of salvation through the resurrection of Christ.

I know this sermon has been a lot of teaching, a lot of background and context. And that is important, but sometimes doesn’t feel as relevant or important to what I’m going through or my experiences in this world today.

But I want to spend a moment to go through what we heard from Acts.

In this big wide world of complexity and conflicting purpose. What is our purpose? What do we as the Church need to do as we face a future of uncertainty? And that begin by first looking at what Church meant to those who knew Jesus the most. This morning’s reading from Acts is so easy to gloss over, it may sound so familiar, but it is actually really important to pay attention to what the early community of Christ believers did together.

It says:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship*

They made a choice to be together

*to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

They experienced Christ through prayer and sacrament like we do this morning in Church together.

*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.*

They were inspired by the good things that God was doing amongst God’s people.

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

They gave generously to the Church as the body of Christ recognizing the need for God’s people to be supported and be united as a people equal in status and value.

*Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being redeemed.*

So this week I was away at Clergy Conference, and some of the best moments are being with other clergy from around the Diocese and hearing the stories of struggle and stories of success, and we were talking about the future of the Anglican Church and what things look like.

I don’t know if you do this when you meet up with your friends over beers? But I did a healthy amount of that this week. (healthy meaning it wasn’t too much beer, but just enough to have a good time right?)

And while there are stories of decline and worries about money in certain places around the Diocese, there are stories of growth. Many stories of growth.

I’m of course optimistic about our future and one of the things that was talked about, was will our model of Church just look a little different.

Some things that people shared are that we don’t see any danger in some of the biggest historic buildings, places that have in of themselves a cultural significance. Like the Cathedral, like some of the established bigger churches falling away.

But if some places do decline, others were suggesting that this model of the Apostles ministry of breaking bread at home and making pilgrimage to the temple, was perhaps what things might look like. And we are talking you know, in 50 to 100 years time.

Things like shared ministries, maybe we experience God together in smaller groups together at home and come to Church for bigger occasions.

I look around and I don’t feel any sense of imminent danger for St. Christopher’s. We as a community have the opportunity to build something special, and I think we can be inspired that the seeds of something special are being sewn as we meet on Sundays.

Maybe you feel like that, maybe you worry, or maybe you have experienced times of worry.

But I think it is always important to come back to this story of early Christian witness.

When you read this passage and think about what we do together in this place.

In Church what we do isn’t far off what is being described that the apostles did together. And really whenever a Church gets away from acting and behaving like this, it loses its heart, its authenticity.

I think that is a testament to what we commit ourselves to be.

It is a testament that we are faithful to the apostles teaching, and it is a testament that a life of devotion and love for each other in our sanctuary of belonging is something that has value in our lives.

We will continue to explore this promise of hope, and I believe that we are living into a destination of hope… I believe in a bright future for St. Christopher and I have dedicated my life to see that happen where I worship and minister.

And so as we earnestly question our relevance and purpose, we hold tighter to those things that give us life.

And we look to live into a world of shared abundance in the life given to God’s Church through the promise of life in Jesus Christ our hope, through the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Amen.