

Fellowship & Faith - 30th May 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 0 0] Hello, how we doing? Great to be back with you for another Sunday session, our regular rendezvous in this virtual version of our God-guided common collective. We've had some welcome sunshine at last, so I hope that's warmed us up nicely for what we've got in store today. Indeed, in terms of these videos, the plan is to keep new YouTube content coming as we journey into summer and beyond. Although as our church life hopefully begins to open up soon at St John's, we just need to work out what kind of online offering and how often we put that out is going to be sustainable.

But in light of that, the band and I are going to take a couple of weeks off from these videos, so after today, we'll be back with a new session on Sunday the 20th of June. If you've been with us since the beginning, you'll have heard me share over a quarter of a million words by now, which is more than enough of my yakking for anyone's ears, I'm sure. And if I'm honest, my battery is pretty low, so I'm going to recharge for a couple of weeks in advance of what looks like being an interesting summer ahead. This is week 63 of these things, some 69 videos in total so far, 68 of which are still available here on YouTube after one was taken down by the BBC after a clip of Monty Don infringed their copyright apparently. Ah Monty, not to worry. So over the next couple of weeks, do feel free to dip into the back catalogue and catch up on any sessions you may have missed. Likewise, our next door parish of St Anne's, Chasetown, have regular online content on their Facebook page, which you'd be welcome to access. And if you want something a bit different, but along similar lines to what we offer here,

I'd recommend checking out Dave Tomlinson on YouTube and his Holy Shed sessions. Always thought provoking stuff with Dave. Now this also means that this week is the last Sunday Stars session with Lottie for the foreseeable future. She's looking at the Apostle Paul this week, but it's been a 64 session marathon for her too. So Lottie's going to lie low for a while, but again, there's an extensive playlist of previous sessions to dip into over the summer. So do check those out from next week, should you wish. Huge thanks to Lottie, who's been brilliant in putting her videos together and has been doing all sorts of visits and support work behind the scenes. So a well-deserved break for her beckons too. For us here though, well, before we get stuck into what's on offer today, we want to thank you God for giving us the gas to get to this stage. For your emotional encouragement and spiritual sustenance of us. Thank you for giving us each other as companions along the way. Those friends and neighbours, family members perhaps, who have pushed us on or picked us up when we've needed it.

We're grateful that you've made us to be relational, a way of being which is rooted in you as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And yet we're also aware of those we know who are struggling today though, those maybe living with physical pain, those grieving, those who are emotionally wrung out.

Give us the nudge we need to be a source of comfort to others. Pop the people into our head who we could bring relief to this week, that the shared life you've given us to lead may be nurtured by your love at work in and through us. Indeed, would you be our companion, our guide as we delve into what's on offer here today? And as we said of others, may you now push us on or pick us up as you see fit, enabling us to entrust ourselves afresh into your care. Thank you God. Amen.

[4 : 1 3] All right, well it seemed right before we have these couple of weeks lying low to follow up last week's session by exploring some of the characteristics of the early church in those post-Pentecost days, in order to see what we might be able to take with us for the season ahead.

Now in the book of Acts, there are various summaries at various points about what the common life of these early followers of Jesus looked like. And so here's a key one of those summaries taken from Acts chapter 2 says about these early believers.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 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, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

[5 : 37] Now it's an inspiring little passage this, a snapshot into the everyday life of these early followers of Jesus, their principles and practices. Indeed their priorities are summarised by four key areas here.

Teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. A bit like a home run in baseball. I guess these four areas cover most bases of what their faith in action looked like.

Teaching, working out their core beliefs, learning about Jesus and how his way of love could be lived out. Fellowship, their communal, common life together. The breaking of bread, a way of eating meals together which included bread and wine as a way to remember and celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection.

And then prayers, interaction and conversation with God through the Spirit. All good stuff, I'm sure. And yet I just want to focus on one of these four areas today.

This word, fellowship. Fellowship. Now, I appreciate fellowship. It's a bit of an old-fashioned word in some ways. Reminds me of sort of Lord of the Rings, Master Frodo and all that.

[6 : 55] You know, it's suited maybe for the shire, not for modern times. And yet as words go, I've got to say, I think fellowship is up there with the best of them.

Indeed, fellowship is the word most English versions of the book of Acts use to translate the original Greek word which the writer Luke uses here, the word *koinonia*.

Now, *koinonia* is a wide-ranging word which can mean partnership or participation, social interaction. Conveys an idea of sharing, of companionship.

It's about community, but actually it's more focused than that. Hence why our Bibles tend to translate it as fellowship. This bond of togetherness which draws people into communion.

You know, a common union with one another and with God. It's originally a word which suggests generosity. Suggests involvement. As we said, participation in a getting stuck in kind of way.

[8 : 01] *Koinonia* is proper community in a shared, open, honest kind of way. Actually, maybe Lord of the Rings had it right.

You know, the bond between Frodo and Sam, Merry and Pippin, Gimli, Legolaso, Gandalf and so on. If you've seen the films, read the books or got the action figures, there is this bond to this company, this kinship, which does convey something of the depth of connection between those who are in fellowship with one another.

Now the good news is that whilst in Lord of the Rings, the fellowship of the ring is all male. The early fellowship of Jesus followers was more eclectic than that.

No hobbits or elves, I grant you, but men and women who we've hopefully got to know a bit better over this past year from Peter and Andrew to Mary and Joanna.

Indeed, the early church in places like Rome, Corinth and Philippi included other women like Phoebe, Priscilla and Lydia who were all overseeing churches.

[9 : 12] Makes you wonder how the role of women in leadership could be suppressed for so long in the centuries which followed. But the original model of communal life, the original model of fellowship, was one of breadth and depth of inclusion and participation.

Yeah, it's good stuff. It's exciting stuff. And this shared life is something which I know so many of us through lockdown realised afresh how vitally important this interwoven, interactive togetherness actually is.

I mean, for me, being back in my local, the Vic, over a couple of nights recently, one time with a bunch from the PCC, you know, the trustees of St John's, last Sunday for the football and West Ham's ultimately successful push for Europe, you know, it was great being back with people, having a drink, having a laugh, sharing the stuff of life with friends.

It's good to be together again. And if I say that as an extreme introvert, I can't imagine how much the extroverts among us have missed that interaction, that sharing, that fellowship.

And yet what's interesting is that when we read how the early church lived out this fellowship, this koinonia, what is depth to it, which I'd say our pubs, our social clubs, most of all, our churches, would do well to take a lead from.

[10:43] I mean, here's some of what's said again. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

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. Now, it's a kind of blueprint for communal life, but I guess it could be argued that it's really from a bygone time and perhaps it's naively idealistic and just wouldn't be practical in the same way today.

And I got sympathy with that view because, of course, our commitments, our relationships, our debts can be far more widespread these days. You know, whether it's pension of poverty, zero-hours contracts, scandalous credit card interest, first-time buyers unable to get on the housing ladder and so on.

In terms of money, at least, the gap between the haves and the have-nots in modern life is only getting wider. And yet the counter-argument to that view is that many of these early followers of Jesus were themselves living in abject poverty, trying to survive under an oppressive Roman regime where taxation to fund Caesar's empire could be as high as 90%.

That's why blokes like Zacchaeus were so hated. You know, these first believers weren't daft or naive. No, they were worldly wise. They were living in pretty complicated times themselves which they needed to navigate.

[12:22] And so what might be helpful is to unpack some of the principles which are outlined here and then see how they might be applied to our own situations, our own lives today.

So what have we got? Well, we're told all the believers were together. They evidently made an effort to meet up, to hang out, to talk, to encourage one another.

They showed up. Of course, for us, being able to be present and show up with one another has been tricky for so long now. But this idea of being together, well, it seems to be such a foundational principle.

It's almost non-negotiable for what it means to be in fellowship with one another under God.

Thinking about that for us, you know, as vicar, I don't really mind what being together looks like for you, whether it's attending a Sunday or midweek service, belonging to a house group, meeting up with folks from church, down a pub for a walk, a drop-in or a coffee shop, being part of a prayer triplet, or even having a regular Zoom with folks, although I suspect that may be bottom of the list for many these days.

Now, however it comes, what matters is that in some way we are together. Not individual lumps of coal that fall out the fireplace and therefore slowly but surely grow cold, but people who receive energy, support, warmth from God through each other.

[14:00] And so whether that's in a 3, a 12, a 70, or 170 of us, it doesn't matter because we're all still part of and connected to the same community.

We're part of that web of interaction. I wonder what your preference, what your preferred size of community, your safe space for connection, might be.

And yet, having said that, a bit later on, we're told every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. So part of their togetherness involved mass gatherings, involved multi-sensory worship, discussion, study, and so on.

But most of all, it meant they were part of something bigger, more varied, less insular, maybe, than just their own chosen inner circle.

And I guess this is where the balance maybe needs to be struck for us. You know, regardless of how and where we're spiritually fed, how might we remain connected to a wider body, a wider fellowship, with the opportunity which comes with that to be surprised and challenged by those we wouldn't ordinarily choose to encounter?

[15:22] Where might your temple courts be? Not every day maybe, not every week even, but somewhere where you encounter people and God in a way which stretches or challenges your faith.

What else? Well, not only were all the believers together, we're told they had everything in common. What does that mean? Well, the word we translate as common is the Greek word koinos, same root as koinonia, indicating a sense of sharing and interdependence.

Now, I don't know what you picture when you think of what it means to have a common life with people. I think for me, there are a couple of levels, maybe.

So on one level, I'd say it's about a shared experience, finding solidarity and support from others, a place where people get it, where there's empathy, relatability, lack of judgment, and instead permission for and even an expectation of honesty.

Now, I don't know if that's your experience of common life, of church life, gathering of people who get it, who are honest and grounded and so on. I mean, at its best, hopefully it is, but at its worst, well, a church can sometimes be far less authentic than that.

[16:54] I guess for me, that's why I've never really got on with the idea of Sunday best or getting dressed up for church. It just seems a bit fake. You know, come as you are, not trying to be something smarter or more polished than is the reality.

That's why I wear exactly the same stuff in church as I do down the pub. You know, I appreciate that's not everyone's view of what a vicar should be, but for me, well, the last thing I want to do is give the impression that we should be somehow different in church to how we are the rest of the week.

Part of what having everything in common means is that there's an authenticity, an honesty to how we are with each other and before God.

I mean, aside from being normal with what we wear or how we look, it's a bit like those times when you're having a conversation and everyone's being polite, but very surface, you know.

You all right? Yeah, I'm fine. Yeah, you? Yeah, not too bad, you know. At least until someone plucks up the courage not to tiptoe around things, but to say, actually, I'm not all right.

[18:06] You know, life sucks at the moment and here's why. And then all of a sudden, it's like the pressure valve is released and people start sharing, feeling able to say, you know, I'm so glad you said that.

I'm not doing so well either. And bit by bit, authentic relationships, honest fellowship is modelled and built.

So firstly, I'd say having everything in common means inviting each other into our lives by sharing honestly about how we're doing.

I mean, Blumenek, even Dominic Cummings said so to that parliamentary committee this week, saying, and I quote, openness is better. The default on everything should be openness.

Now, opinions on Dominic Cummings aside, at least the principle of what he's saying, I think, is right. Openness with each other, openness with God, our fellowship with each other and with God is better served by having everything in common.

[19:12] And so, how might you perhaps be more open, more vulnerable with others going forward from here? But then secondly, having everything in common seems to be not just socially but practically, economically even, as well.

As we read, they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Seems because they were prepared to be open and honest with each other, genuine need, you know, an empty cupboard, an unpaid bill, an unexpected expense.

Well, those needs could be met by those who had the means to do so because they knew about them. Indeed, a bit later in Acts, we read this of the early church.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. Now, I don't know what you think of that.

It's not like some political systems whereby you have no option other than to come under common ownership. Nah, this appears to be a voluntary system where the sharing of resources was freely offered.

[20:31] What's mine is yours. My home is your home. Your debts are my debts. It's radical stuff, this model of fellowship which the book of acts puts forward.

And I appreciate this intimate sharing. It goes against so much of our Western individualistic consumer culture. And yet, what do you reckon? Do we reject this model as being overly simplistic, idealistic, impractical?

Or, does it remain something we might ask God to help us work towards, putting more into practice? I mean, it does tie in with what Jesus says.

For example, one time he said to his disciples, sell your possessions and give to the poor for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. It's interesting perhaps to flip that last bit around as

well as in my experience, where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.

In other words, whatever we value, whatever we care about, whoever we love, we'll invest our treasure in, our money, our resources, our time and so on.

[21 : 51] You know, I wonder if this might just be a key lesson which we'd do well to consider as we come out, hopefully, of lockdown. If the biggest thing we've missed and realised we've taken for granted in the past is our communal, shared life under God, if that is where our heart truly lies, then might God just be saying to you and to me, okay, if that's where your heart is, put your treasure there too, invest in that communal life, enable those in need to have their needs met, provide a welcome to people that is generous and abundant and free, practice hospitality, give from what you've received.

as Vicar of St. John's, I've been so heartened, so impressed by the way in which financial giving has kept coming in to us as a church all through lockdown.

We haven't met in person for 15 months now, but people like you have been so faithful in their giving, their generosity and the way we've been able to meet people's practical needs through Burma Be a Friend, through all sorts of other quiet ways, has been the biggest privilege of my life. I wish everyone, all of you, could have seen the faces I've seen of people we've been able to help through your generosity and giving. It's been a truly beautiful thing, seeing God's provision being received by glad and sincere hearts, hearts, as it says in Acts.

So a huge thank you for the giving and the gifts, the donations, the funds which have been so faithfully given because it's been so special for us as a church leadership to be able to be generous on behalf of all of us.

[23 : 44] And you know, one of my dreams when we finally reopen our doors fully is that we might take that spirit of generosity, of gift, and build on it.

to make generosity, food, provision, hospitality, joy, so central to our common life, so natural to what our church fellowship is about, that our town and beyond might encounter the very person of Jesus through all that we're able to share from all that God has entrusted to us.

I am more convinced than ever that generosity is at the heart of the faith filled life, it's at the heart of the way of Jesus, it's at the heart of the good news, of the kingdom, it's at the heart of what true fellowship is all about.

I know for Gemma and I, for our family, we can testify to the joy that comes with generosity. We're a work in progress, of course we are, but it really is more blessed to give than receive.

But we've also been on the receiving end of other people's generosity to us, which really is humbling. But more than just money or stuff, generosity builds fellowship, it builds friendship, it builds faith.

[25 : 09] Generosity, all rooted in teaching, in breaking bread, in prayer, in worship, well it's no wonder that we're told these early followers of Jesus spent their time praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.

And it was contagious stuff because the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. That's the kind of church I want to belong to, that's the kind of church I want us to be.

Generous in heart, generous in spirit, generous in practice, generous in love. I don't know the extent to which we're meant to pool our possessions or for you and I to sell what we have to enable this to happen more.

Maybe that's something we can work through together as a church, as a fellowship. But I do know that we're called to meet together, to openly share our lives, and to build up our common life by living generously.

I leave you to work out with God what living generously might mean for you in this new season ahead, the level of your giving and so on. And if you want to start or increase your giving at St. John's, there's details of how to do that on our website.

[26 : 29] But to come back to where we started, the word we translate as fellowship, koinonia. It is indeed a rich word, one which sums up so much of what it means to be in relationship, to be in fellowship with one another, and ultimately with God.

As we hopefully get closer to some sort of return to a gathering together, and as perhaps these two weeks off, these Sunday sessions give us a chance to take stock with God before that.

My prayer, my hope, my dream, is that our future common life together as a church will be one which is characterized, inspired, and shaped by a God who places generous fellowship, koinonia, at

the heart of how we as God's people might live.

May that be our story from here on in. All right, well, lots to ponder, maybe.

So to help us do that with God, here's a new track, which the St John's band have kindly put together for us, a gentle, reflective version of the song by the grace of God.

[27 : 50] God. God. founding of God. I rest my soul on Jesus When the mountains shake I put my trust in Jesus The moment I awake And when my soul is lost at sea

He will be my rock My vision be in Christ alone This grace is all we've got His love is like the mighty ocean And His love for me will never stop Oh His arms are strong enough to carry me Through it all by the grace of God So high upon His shoulders Safely bought this far

Helper of my helpless soul The King of broken hearts His love is like the mighty ocean His love for me will never stop Oh His arms are strong enough to carry me Through it all by the grace of God You are the passion of my life Lord Jesus You are the song within my soul My strength, my hope, my all in all is You

Jesus, You Thank you, Lord Thank you, Lord When breath grows still And night draws near I will not be afraid I know the plans He has for me Don't finish at my grave

His love is like the mighty ocean And His love for me will never stop All His arms are strong enough to carry me Through it all by the grace of God Through it all by the grace of God By Your grace I'll stand Lovely stuff As usual, there's an extra time to accompany this session

[33 : 08] With various thoughts and questions In follow-up to what we've been looking at today And just as a reminder As I said at the top We're taking a break from YouTube for two weeks So no new Sunday sessions for the next fortnight But we'll be back on Sunday the 20th of June Do subscribe to this channel for a reminder of that Maybe like St John's Community Church on Facebook As well as we'll post on there too But for now and for these two weeks Let me pray for us that God's blessing might go with us And so may you know Deep in your innermost being Deep in your soul The blessing of God Almighty The Father, Son and Holy Spirit May you know that blessing dwelling so richly in you That you might be a channel That you might be a channel of God's love God's joy And God's peace

To all those who God has gifted you to live alongside Both now and always Amen Thank you Thank you Congratulations Thank you You Thank you Thank you