

“MALTON CIVIC SERVICE”

“Christian Community”

Scripture Readings – Psalms, 133:1-3 & Acts, 4:32-33

Psalms, 133:1-3

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life for evermore.

Acts, 4:32-33

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

What if 'THE BIOGRAPHY CHANNEL' decided to film the story of your life?

If we were tuning in now, we could watch documentaries about the long-running television series: 'FRIENDS' and 'THE SIMPSONS'. Tonight must be music night, as there will be biographies of Gladys Knight, Olivia Newton-John, John Travolta, The Bee Gees, and Abba.

But just imagine if we could have a 'BIOGRAPHY SPECIAL' about your life...

Where would the producer send his camera crew?

Maybe they would start at the hospital or house where you were born. Then move on to your childhood home – or, if you had a string of those – to one in which you lived during some pivotal time in your life. We would have film of the schools that you attended, and your college; perhaps the site of your first job. Maybe there would be a feature on the place where you met and married your spouse. Perhaps they would come here, to this church – or to another church that has been central to your spiritual development.

There are so many places the writers could focus their attention.

There are so many people and places that are important in the telling of your story. As for content, some of the elements to include would be obvious – the clear turning points in your life. Moments... decisions... that shaped all the days that followed.

But to give the audience – and let's face it, it would be a massive audience if you were the subject – a genuine picture of your life, the producer would do well to identify the 'every-day' pieces of your existence. You know – what you are like at the breakfast table, not just when you are making some important life-changing decision that will affect yourself and others.

It is important, if we really want to know what someone is like, that we know about the every-day-ness of his or her life, because the ins-and-outs of your routine tell us so much about how and why you are the way you are...

Your morning routine... rising early, or late; shuffling into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, or striding confidently in with your morning newspaper folded under an arm; greeting others with a cheerful, "good morning", or a series of grunts only when you are addressed first; lingering in prayer, or slurping coffee on your way out the door?

Your lunchtime habits... do you eat a quick lunch because you have to maximize the hours of your day, or do you take a break from the hectic pace of life to take a walk, or listen to a piece of music; do you prefer to meet friends for lunch, or eat alone?

Your evenings... are they spent working; building relationships with family or friends; relaxing with a book or a favourite television show; spending hours on the internet; praying or listening to music; early to bed or very late to bed?

These things are not apparent to the casual observer, but they tell us volumes about you – about your priorities, your character, and your interests.

Luke takes us behind the scenes of the Early Christian Church.

Anyone producing the Story of the Early Christian Church for THE BIOGRAPHY CHANNEL could figure out: "OK, we need to talk about Pentecost and the fact that the Holy Spirit gave the followers of Christ the ability to communicate the gospel in languages they never learned... and we certainly need to include the story of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate who was healed in the name of Jesus Christ by Peter and John... and we really ought to talk about how the religious court reprimanded Peter and John and told them never to preach again in the name of Jesus and how they said they couldn't help talking about what they had seen and heard".

Luke takes us backstage of the Early Christian Church.

Behind the headline events at Pentecost and mind-blowing miracles to the ordinary people of the Early Church, and, believe it or not, this snapshot may be as stunning as the more public displays of the Holy Spirit's power. The followers of Christ have become unified, a unity that is characterised by a single-minded devotion to Christ and to each other.

'All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.'

Acts, 4:32-33, NIV

These verses give us an invaluable insight as to what makes a true community...



THE GRACE OF UNITY

'ALL THE BELIEVERS WERE ONE IN HEART AND MIND'

Can you imagine what would happen if every person was united together?

I have no idea how many people there are in the United Kingdom, but what great things could be achieved if we all pooled our resources together, exercised our faith together, decided to get busy together, and unselfishly serve God and the community in which we live? What a difference it must make if **'ALL THE BELIEVERS WERE ONE IN HEART AND MIND'**.

'In "THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS", C S Lewis imagined Screwtape (the devil) teaching his young nephew, Wormwood, a little demon who has been assigned the task of recruiting members into the Kingdom of Hell. In the first chapter, Screwtape says to Wormwood: "You will find that the Church is fertile soil. The Church is one of the best places to find recruits for Hell".

'The old devil gives the young demon wise words of advice: "Keep them bickering over programs, procedures, money, organization, personal hurts, and misgivings. Keep them bickering. Whatever you do, do not let them see the banners wave, because if they ever see the banners wave, we have lost them forever".'

It is almost as though C S Lewis is telling us: *'The secret to having a great community is to have our vision fixed firmly upon the Almighty God. When we are so caught up in Jesus Christ, we will not have time to bicker, we will not have time to worry about life's little hurts. When we are caught up in the task of carrying his banner to a lost and dying world, then the Christian Church will march forward in triumph once again, and will impact the lives of society'.*

'May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

Romans, 15:5-6, NIV

THE GRACE OF GENEROSITY

'NO-ONE CLAIMED ANY OF HIS POSSESSIONS WAS HIS OWN, BUT SHARED EVERYTHING THEY HAD'

Their devotion to their faith and to Jesus Christ and their commitment to each other was so serious that it took control of their wallets and chequebooks. Luke frequently mentions the importance of sacrificial giving in that Early Christian Community.

Why would they want to give to God and others at such personal cost?

One of the unmistakable characteristics of love is giving. If you show me your cheque book and your bank statements, I can tell you what you love. If you show me an hourly log of your day – where you give your time and energy – I can tell you what you love. And the reality is that you could do the same with me. We are investing our money and our moments for love... and so did the early church community.

These men and women were consumed by what God had done for them.

By God's power to overcome the most devastating human action possible by raising from the dead his Son, whom we had crucified.

By God's ability to redeem human sin and bring good, even from what was intended for evil.

By Jesus' willingness to forgive those who bitterly failed him, and to restore them to be his representatives in the world.

By God's empowering Holy Spirit which caused prayerful and ordinary people to be used in ways they could never have imagined.

By the miraculous gift of changed lives in the name of, and for the sake of, Jesus.

Basking in the glow of what they had received from the Holy One, they did not keep score about what they were giving for his sake. In comparison to the gifts of God, their giving paled... but they gave all they could: their lives... their fortunes... their time... and their testimony for the good of the community and the society in which they lived.

THE GRACE OF WITNESS

'WITH GREAT POWER THE APOSTLES CONTINUED TO TESTIFY TO THE RESURRECTION OF THE LORD JESUS, AND MUCH GRACE WAS UPON THEM ALL'

Your testimony is a mighty power to overcome the devil.

When you testify whom Jesus is in your life, you are throwing water on Satan's fire that is trying to devour you. Testify who you are. Tell Satan that when Jesus died, you died. You were crucified with Christ. Tell Satan that when Jesus was buried, you were buried. You were buried with Christ. Tell Satan that when Jesus was raised, you were raised. Tell Satan that when Jesus ascended, you ascended. You are redeemed, accepted, and empowered by the Lord Jesus Christ. You are now a King and a Priest forever

'They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.'

Revelation, 12:11, NIV

Believers overcome Satan when they testify whom Jesus is.

He is Lord. He is the Lamb who died. He is the Lion who rules. When Satan comes against you, testify about what Jesus did at Calvary on the Cross and the empty tomb of that Easter morning.

I believe the Church does the community a disservice by not preaching the gospel.

'Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him".'

John, 3:16-17, NIV

I am not sure what Aaron made of having oil poured on his head and experiencing it trickle down his beard, but 'HOW GOOD AND PLEASANT IT IS WHEN BROTHERS LIVE TOGETHER IN UNITY!' (Psalms, 133:1). I pray that we may experience the amazing unity of God's grace that impacts in a profound way in our community – cannot we today make that impact?