**St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 7 May 2017 Communion Easter 4**

**Acts 2:42-47 The Companionship of the Believers**

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

**Contemporary Reading Ch 15. ‘The quiet revolution’ in *How to be a bad Christian and a better human being***  by Dave Tomlinson

When I agreed to take Carol’s funeral, the undertaker told me there would be only four or five people at the service. She was a forty-five-year-old feisty Nonconformist who grew up in a sleepy village in Bedfordshire, to which she seldom returned. She drank heavily and developed a heroin addiction, though she recovered from the addiction some years before her death.

When I spoke with her father on the telephone, he said he couldn’t tell me a lot about Carol’s life. He knew her as a rebellious teenager, a substance abuser and a misfit. He was aware that she lived in London and worked in a charity shop but that was about it. He confirmed that the congregation in the crematorium would be small: him and his wife, plus two other relatives. I felt sad that I knew so little about Carol, and that her passing at a mere forty-five years of age was so uneventful.

As I walked from the car to the crematorium chapel the following day, I noticed thirty or forty people standing a little way from the building, chatting and rolling cigarettes. The cortège wasn’t expected for another fifteen minutes so I decided to speak with the group – who turned out to be Carol’s friends. Within a few minutes I had a completely different picture of her, and a quite different story to tell.

Almost all of the group were volunteer workers in charity shops in North London, a ragtag bunch of Goths and punks, along with a few more conventional types. One after another they eulogised Carol. One man in his early thirties with spiky black hair, a tattooed face and countless piercings said, ‘Most of us have problems, man. But Carol was like a mother to us. She gathered us in and looked after us.’ Another man, who I later discovered was her shop manager, asked if he could speak in the service where he talked movingly of Carol’s maternal qualities. ‘The charity shops are our family,’ he said, ‘A lot of us have mental health issues, but we’ve found a community where we can belong. Carol loved a drink, and she was always the last one dancing at 4 am, but she was the heartbeat of the family. She looked after everyone.’

Carol’s parents were mild-mannered, middle-class folk. I wondered how they would react to the funeral of their prodigal being gatecrashed by a bunch of apparent dropouts and misfits. The couple thought they knew who their daughter was: a flaky wastrel, a drug addict and an alcoholic – but now they heard about a completely different woman.

‘I wish I could meet her now,’ her mum told me afterwards, ‘We had no idea what a wonderful person she had become, or that she was part of such a loving family.’ Outside the crematorium, Carol’s dad went across to her friends and said, ‘We planned to take Carol’s remains back to Bedfordshire, but now we feel she should stay here with you in London where you can all visit her regularly and easily.’ The hugs and tears that followed between a reserved ‘out-of-town couple and a bunch of urban castaways was a sight to behold.

I am becoming more and more in awe of the power of community. I tremble at the power of the life which can be breathed into a person through interaction on really ordinary levels with other really ordinary human beings. Carol’s story, written by Dave Tomlinson, is happening all over the world. Sadly too, the first part of the story is also happening, without the friends who turn up at the crem. How could we make sure more stories have more adequate endings? In the language of this weekend's SATRS seminar how can we ensure humans flourish?

I know people who are recovering from mental illness because of others taking an interest, mothering them perhaps a little, befriending them, noticing them, remembering their name, inviting them to join a group. Each seemingly quite insignificant moments but with immense power.

I frequently observe the miracle of community on Wednesdays at cuppa and chat. The power of being listened to without interruption and being affirmed in one’s triumphs or the triumphs of the family, as well as the importance of being able to say ‘life really, really sucks at the moment’ or the importance of knowing that a group is waiting for you to return if you go away, is patently obvious. Now that the group knows each other better, advice can be given and shared - not always a good idea at the beginning but once you get to know each other, it can work. Someone said the other day:

“I feel sorry for my friend who has no one to talk to. I have this group.”

I hope you all have a similar arrangement in your life. It might be one friend, or someone you text with a black humour joke on a bad day. It might be someone you call every 2 or 3 months, or someone in your regular coffee shop who remembers how you like your drink served.

It is important that we matter to someone somewhere. When we are first born we look up and seek the pair of eyes we hope are looking down on us, reflecting back to us our selves. It is our first discovery that we are separate from the warm heart-beat-filled pool of fluid in which we have been swimming for nine months. It is the beginning of the realisation that we are a unique human being, separate from everyone else. And those eyes of those significant others tell us we exist. If those eyes smile consistently at us, they tell us we are important and loved.

Nothing else later in life will ever quite replace that first significant mirroring of ourselves back to ourselves, but other interactions can help keep our sense of self intact as we live on in the world.

The reading from Acts tell us that the new emerging church, only about six weeks after Jesus’ death, started to gather itself and began to form community. They shared possessions and food, and cared for the needy within their group. They would have needed to do so because even in those very early days, to follow that rabble rouser from Nazareth was dangerous, unpopular and just plain weird. Later, persecution would intensify and these strong bonds formed now would become even more significant.

St Andrew’s says everyone is welcome and that is meant sincerely here. It really doesn’t matter in which way you deviate from the norm – height, weight, hair colour, orientation, theology as long as you also welcome others and allow everyone to ‘be’ here, also made welcome in this warm nest of humanity.

Some of us have warm nests elsewhere and need the emotional warmth of this group less than others. But our minds may need companionship because we find other Christians do not always agree with us as the Jewish followers did not agree with the Jesus followers in the first century.

Others of us need an outlet for our burning outrage at the injustices still done in our community through neglect or poor government or by those people who will commit evil acts for their own pleasure or advancement.

There are many reasons for us being here. We treat each other respectfully because we each have a unique set of reasons for coming. Because we have such reasons, we know it is important for others in other ways to have this group they can call their faith community too.

Carol’s story from Dave’s book is filled with ironies. There would be many reasons why a community had grown around the North London charity shop circuit. We can only guess what life experience led Carol herself into alcoholism and drug addiction. Were her mild mannered parents cold and distant or did another, later, trauma throw her gyroscope off centre? Ironically, the person whom Dave Tomlinson saw through her parents’ eyes as an outcast and misfit turned out to be the vital maternal glue that held a disparate community of society’s most vulnerable together.

I remember years ago being asked to run an evening on spirituality for a group of severely disabled people associated with a day care centre in Dunedin. I will never forget the atmosphere. Each person had their own battered and bruising history and they were speaking directly and authentically out of it. Especially because they had been battered and bruised themselves, they were not going to batter or bruise anyone else in the room. I wonder if it was like that for Carol? She knew what it was like to be battling to live in North London without a mother handy, so she became that mother to her clutch of chicks.

We are all pilgrims here. Some of us more bruised than others. Some need more help over the stile than others might. Others can stride ahead and map out the way before us. All have their place and all have their value here. Sometimes the ‘mothers’ amongst us have the greatest need, sometimes it is the childlike who show the way for us all.

Carol’s manager said: “A lot of us have mental health issues, but we’ve found a community where we can belong.” I should think most of us can say – “I have issues, but I’ve found a community where I can belong.” When I hear of young people lonely in their flats, moving from class to class in a large university, living with little money for exciting recreation, I think what a valuable place a church community is. Not only is friendship available, and acceptance, but each week we ponder something meaningful and eternally significant surrounded by beauty of architecture, colour, words and music. Why would we take this for granted? Why would we treat it as something onerous or weird? Why would we assume it is something in which other people would show no interest or that they would gain no benefit from it?

In being a loving community which supports and challenges, which weeps and laughs together, we are reflecting an ancient concept of what God might be like. Since the early centuries of the Christian faith, God has been seen in three manifestations – a creator/parent kind of being, a spirit which holds the world together and Jesus the eastern teacher and mystic. Just because the concept of the Trinity didn’t begin in the Bible doesn’t mean the idea has no value. The description of the relationship between the three aspects of God uses a Greek concept - perichoresis – *peri* = around, *choresis* = to dance. The three persons are imagined as weaving in and out of each other, being in an intertwined and intertwining relationship; indivisible, yet also distinct. The trinity is a model of loving caring relationship, of mutual support and constant interaction. It is one we could do well to emulate.

A critical review of medical literature in 2005 concluded ‘Religious activity may improve health outcomes.’ The report of the study included comments like this:

Religious intervention such as intercessory prayer may improve success rates of in vitro fertilization, decrease length of hospital stay and duration of fever in septic patients, increase immune function, improve rheumatoid arthritis, and reduce anxiety. Frequent attendance at religious services likely improves health behaviors. [sic] Moreover, prayer may decrease adverse outcomes in patients with cardiac disease.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A number of other studies investigate the value of various kinds of spirituality and religious practice in health outcomes. Several suggest the medical profession needs to take the spiritual and religious backgrounds of their patients more seriously during terminal and other serious illnesses.

To me, actual physical outcomes are like the cherry on the top. What I see anecdotally bears those findings out. Maybe churches are full of older people not only because younger people are not coming but because the older people who attend church live longer!

I am grateful for the affection and friendship I feel here. I am glad to see it in operation as people get to know each other better through cluster groups and postcode meetings. As we continue to be a community here together, welcoming newcomers all the time as well as the formal welcome we offer Jenn and Barrie and Janet today, let us celebrate the spirituality of life among us.

Let us not only snuggle happily into this warm nest, but from within this nest let us reach out to others and support them – like when we might support the Pink Shirt Tea on The Terrace event on Friday May 26 or when we might attend a political meeting organised by our social justice people to show politicians we care about income inequality or poor housing. We receive care and support here, let’s share it.

We will join metaphorically around the table in a few moments. Let us also let us form a virtual circle of love which spreads wider and wider in our community here. And as we leave here later let us take that love into the communities beyond of which we are all an integral part, so that more than only we here know the power of community within the Spirituality of Life.

It is easy to transform a life, simply pay attention.

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1. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16781528 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)