

Celebration Sunday Message

Seven Days of Solidarity 2022

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Acts 2:42-47 The Fellowship of the Believers

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 favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Living worship, word and deed: inspired by our Global Neighbours

Seven Days of Solidarity tells stories of neighbour loving neighbour and the Kingdom of God being expressed in intensely practical ways. From people getting fresh water, access to education, resources to become entrepreneurial and develop value and trade: these are really practical manifestations of Jesus' vision: "I have come that you may have life, and life in all its fullness." They are an expression of the gospels in action.

This has always been the story of the Church. In the book of Acts, the early church integrated its telling of the story of Jesus into its life as a community of people who follow Jesus, and its life of service to those who the wider community thought were unworthy and unlovable.

In Jesus' own ministry we saw that same integration in his proclamation, in his forming of a community of disciples (who were, as we read, a pretty motley crew) and in a ministry that included signs and wonders to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven.

A life-giving visit to the Church of North India Amritsar Diocese where UnitingWorld partners, gifted me new eyes to see. The ministry of this church wasn't simply to the Christians. It was to where the need was greatest. It was to children in villages no matter what the dominant religion of that village was, it was to places where schools aren't working, it was to women to give them economic power, it was to the "untouchables" in the communities who are being exploited.

The love of Jesus Christ, the gospel, was always integral to what was being done. It was lived out, it was spoken about, it was shared with joy and with thanksgiving and with great humility. Communities of faith were being formed - communities of hope and encouragement.



It's this example of integrated word, worship and action that I brought back to the church in Queensland.

Over the past few years, UnitingCare here in Queensland has been working on a project called Connect 100, and the vision is that in a community where both a UnitingCare ministry is present, as well as a local Uniting Church congregation, the ministries will be integrated. In that way, the various ministries of the Church will be seen as a whole. It's a wonderful vision and it will strengthen and develop our community's experience of the gospel. Our worship, our witness, and our service will find greater common ground.

In Brisbane city, new communities of faith are emerging, and they're not only about forming a Christian community. One has just appointed a full-time pastor to coordinate the Church's ministry with homeless people. This is a church that doesn't have a building, that doesn't seem really interested in that kind of infrastructure. These new expressions of church aren't simply Christian versions of a rock concert. They are the manifestation of the Spirit, seeking to form and grow and develop new communities of faith to live out the gospel.

One of the themes through the Scriptures is the way the worshipping life of the faith community gets disconnected from its wider life. The prophets of old upset the religious leaders because they were obsessed with "right worship" and yet wilfully blind to the injustices around them. And we see instances, also, where Jesus defends acts of costly devotion against arguments of distribution of assets.

The abiding challenge for the church is for it not to get lost in its religiosity; that is, not to form a holy huddle that's of no earthly use. But there's also the challenge not to be seduced by the idea "if it is to be, its up to me"- a maxim that erodes the sense of presence and power of God in the life of the world.

I think own discipleship journeys have very similar challenges. Our devotion must lead to our love of neighbour and being loved by our neighbour, and this must also call us into the wonder of creation, into an encounter with Christ in one another.

My discipleship over the last few years has been really challenged by how much I live in the life of the church; every waking hour seems to be about the church! I don't think that's what God intends for any of us. The Church of North India provoked me into seeing that the church isn't actually about the church. Our ministry beyond ourselves is not a transaction between two parties. It's a sign, an instrument, and a foretaste of the coming Kingdom of God.

And that's an all-encompassing vision; it's a vision beyond our understanding. It's a vision that should rightly challenge our understanding and our appreciation of how broad and how wide and how effective the love of God is.

It can't be contained, controlled, defined by us.

What did Paul say? "Even now we see in a mirror dimly; then we shall see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I shall fully know, even as I am fully known. But these three abide; faith, hope, and love.



I think the posture of the disciple has to be about this integration, and it also has to be about a sense of wonder that says that has some room to move. We can't overdefine our outcomes or what we expect, for if we start defining that too narrowly we'll find we've got it wrong, we've been limited by our own imagination. I think the question for us is: have we tasted enough of the love, the acceptance, and forgiveness that's in the Kingdom to be able to demonstrate it to others? And then we can point towards the source of that love, acceptance and forgiveness.

Our ministry isn't a transaction between well meaning people and the objects of our compassion. Our ministry is to enable others to encounter the Kingdom of God themselves, to see themselves as people within that Kingdom, and agents of God's purpose in the life of the world. We are called to point beyond ourselves.

Jesus himself said: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Our call, surely, is to introduce people to the story of Jesus, to the story of people of faith. We invite people into that journey to help them see and understand their life in the light of this great salvation story of God, and to see how they too can be agents of God's purpose in the world.

But we need to win the right to speak. Winning the right to speak is putting our beliefs into action, but if we *only* act, we don't actually open the door to people to come and meet God themselves and to know themselves as the children of God.

One of the really interesting things that I see happening in the Old Testament is that dynamic where a child sees something and asks the question "Why is this happening?" People observe the church at work in the life of the world, and that evokes the question. We've won the right to speak when the question is asked of us: why do you act that way?

I really yearn for the day when word, worship and action is more completely integrated into our lives as individuals and as a Church. Seven Days of Solidarity tell stories that manifest that integration. These are signs and a foretaste for us of what life can be for us in our communities of faith. I'm grateful to UnitingWorld for opening windows for us as the Australian Church to see and hear the faith that's alive and at work among our Global Neighbours, beyond our patch.

Participating in the life of the global church encourages us to think about our life, our purpose, how we're inviting the questions and how we're living out the Kingdom in the small patch we find ourselves today.



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