

# TFTD L16: Service

Monday March 28<sup>th</sup>



This week's theme for Thought For The Day is SERVICE.

Acts 2.44-45 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.

“Through fasting, prayer, and acts of service you bring us back to your generous heart.” That’s part of the special Eucharistic prayer we use in Lent, and it reminds us that the themes we’ve been exploring during this Lenten series all hang together. Prayer and fasting are very ancient holy habits — and they’re always linked with practical action to bring God’s kingdom closer ‘in earth as it is in heaven’, as Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer.

The prophet Isaiah has some challenging things to say about making that

practical connection: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the binds of injustice, to undo the things of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

That's how the first Christians in the book of Acts saw it. The immediate result of their new faith was intensely practical: they became a community of giving, a community that pooled its resources to help the poor. Acts 4.32-37 tells us more: The whole congregation of believers was united as one — one heart, one mind. They didn't even claim ownership of their own possessions. No-one said, "That's mine; you can't have it." They shared everything. ... And so it turned out that not a person among them was needy. Those who owned fields or houses sold them and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and made an offering of it. The apostles then distributed according to each person's need. [The Message]

A crazy ideal? Did it really happen? Certainly some people did this — Luke gives us one example in Barnabas, who sold a field he owned in Cyprus and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet — i.e. put it at their disposal to feed the poor. And we find other examples in the book of Acts — like the lady called Tabitha in Joppa, who started a sewing club for making baby clothes in her front room (Acts 9.36-39), or the church in Antioch which got up a collection for famine relief when they heard there was a famine in Jerusalem (Acts 11.27-30). And then there's the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.1-11, who seem have got hold of the wrong end of the stick ...

What's interesting is that this idea creates a 'virtuous circle' of service, where surplus wealth (or time, or energies) become an offering, offered to God in order to be used in God's service for other people. Acts of service flowing into the

church — and flowing out again. So in Acts ch.6.1 we find the whole thing has turned into a major charitable operation, with a daily distribution (food, clothing, money? We don't know) to 'the widows' — women and children who had no safety net of social services to help them survive on their own. It's got so big that rows are breaking out — Hey! Why did she get more than me? And it's getting too much for the apostles to manage on their own.

What's the solution? Cut back all this practical stuff so as to focus on prayer and Bible Study? The apostles were aware that they mustn't get swamped, mustn't lose sight of their God-given task: prayer and preaching are essential to the life of the church. Maybe they remembered Jesus telling them to 'come apart by yourselves and rest awhile' when they were swamped with needy people coming and going so they didn't even have time to eat (Mark 6.30-31). But the need is endless — and that's also the church's core business (Mark 6.32-34). The solution is to get more people involved — finding other people who are already being nudged and stirred by God's Holy Spirit to see the practical problems and work out how to deal with them, maybe people with a different skill-set from the apostles (Acts 6.2-7). And so the virtuous circle grows wider and wider, drawing more and more people, people with different talents and skills, into the service of God's kingdom.

I'm just back from a great weekend at the Diocesan Lay Conference in Swanwick, Derbyshire, which was all about enlarging that virtuous circle, inspiring everyone in the church to get involved in the service of the Kingdom. Its title was 'Not just Sundays' — because this isn't just about doing things in church, but also about helping us to see our whole lives as service to God. Here's a morning prayer from the Conference which I wanted to share (even though TFTD is a little late this mornin!):

Loving Lord,

as we come to this new day,  
we set ourselves to face its joys and sorrows,  
and in doing so,  
we lay your feet  
the faces we will see,  
the voices we will hear,  
the words we will speak,  
the hands we will shake,  
the elbows we will elbow-bump,  
the service we will give,  
the laughs we will share,  
and the secret hurts we will discover about each other.  
We lay them at your feet,  
and in doing so we surrender to your will.  
Lord, renew us by your life-giving Holy Spirit,  
that we may service and worship you today in spirit and in truth.  
Amen.

## HOLYHABITS

PS there will be a chance to talk through some of these issues in the CHURCHES TOGETHER LENT GROUPS meeting on Monday evenings or Thursday afternoons through Lent. Do come along if you can. Or if you can't come in person but would like the discussion notes, just let me know and I'll add you to the list.

NEXT WEEK: LENT 5: THE BREAKING OF BREAD (Holy Habits chapter 1).  
Monday April 4th, 7.30 pm @ SPJ / Thursday April 7th, 2.30 pm @  
AEMC. (Revd Rod Hill)