

Sermon 15 May 2011, Acts 2: 42 – 47.

Nikolai and I are engaged in a month long retreat with an online community focussing on a Benedictine spirituality, entitled “Monasteries of the Heart”.

Each day we read from a book of the same name by Joan Chittester. Three times per week we receive written and spoken reflections, with guiding questions. We are encouraged to read and reflect on the Scriptures, and to post our responses online. Right now we are at the end of the first week.

I am finding it refreshing and satisfying. We are part of a world wide virtual “Monastery of the Heart”. , connected by intention and by prayer and reading of the Scriptures, with people who place equal value on going inwards and going outwards. On Thursday, we called a friend in Sydney and shared our reflections on Skype.

At the same time, I have been reflecting on this mornings reading from the book of Acts, Chapter 2, which presents a picture of another community forming; a community of people captivated and inspired by Holy Spirit.

Here we see them:

Praying and praising God,

Sharing in the sacrament – breaking bread,

Sharing what they have with generous hearts so no-one is left out, no-one is hungry. It is an inspiring, encouraging and challenging snapshot. I wonder what the neighbours made of it?.

What comes across is enthusiasm and life. The sort of abundant life that we read in John 10: 10, Jesus’ words, I came so that you may have life, life in all its fullness.

In contrast to thieves who snatch away any semblance of real life.

All this, of course, invites me to reflect on my life, our life here, and my/our experience of community. Where do I find life inspired by spirit?. In whom do I find life inspired by spirit?. What drives me, nourishes me, inspires me?.

I have given one example already of our monastery of the Heart retreat. Joan Chittenden who leads it, is soaked in the scriptures and the Benedictine rule. She exudes love, and generosity and care. This retreat is not just a spiritual exercise. It connects me with the world.

Last Tuesday, I met with the committee that has been reviewing my ministry. We prayed, we shared food and wine (Champagne actually), to celebrate the completion of the process. The Group, Georgina, Neville, Peter, Jill, Alistair, John, Barry, shared their experience. For each, it was an opportunity for community, a meeting of minds and hearts and sharing of gifts, with a common purpose, and all were thankful.

I could mention so many small groups within Holy covenant and reflect on their life. I will name just a sample:

The people who play scrabble on a Thursday morning,

Those who meditate on Tuesday lunchtime or Wednesday evening, who share meals and retreats together,

Play group,

SOS Prayer vine,

Crafty Crew on Mondays inviting new members and enabling people isolated by disability to be there.

Community lunches,

Susan Joys group on kids and faith,

The resources team meditating around bread and wine and faithfully caring for the physical facilities of the community.

Childrens church,

St John's care volunteers,

Youth group,

Taize services,

On Friday I popped in on our youth Adults dinner. Over a dozen people gathered around a meal at the Body's sharing their lives and showing their concern. What is attractive to me about this community of Holy Covenant is its prayerfulness and generosity. There seems to be a buzz of excitement and a willingness to share God's love through god's spirit with each other and the world. Youth group sponsors a child through World vision. We give to those in need, money, time food, many volunteers at St John's Care, Rod in central Australia, Ella – UC Breakfasts. We speak up against injustice, march and write letters.

It is God who is our centre. Please tell me if this is not your experience. If you feel isolated or disconnected or not heard, if you desire more. If you are hurting, please share your pain, tell me, or someone you trust, and perhaps together we can share the load. Ella wanted to read and reflect on the scriptures with others. She has put it out there, and hopes to gather a small community around her in this. What about you? What do you want?.

Nikolai's vision for an intercessory prayer community.....

My vision as I have said again and again is of an inclusive god, centred inclusive community of grace. Where all, not just those who look nice, or have their act

together – all, are invited and welcomed. A breathing space, where we like those in Acts 2: 42 – 47, are the body of Christ, nourished by Spirit through teaching and fellowship, prayer, praising God, breaking bread together and thankfully sharing what we have together with generous hearts.

Our community is formed when unique people decide to share the same purpose. Each person here is unique, but we all want to share Gods love, don't we? I give thanks for the uniqueness of each person and for being part of this community. I look around and see healing grace flowing within and beyond this community. I wonder what the neighbours make of us? (How can we improve?).

A childrens story Susan Joy showed me this week ends:-

The heart that gives thanks is a happy one. For we cannot feel thankful and unhappy at the same time. The more we say thanks, the more we find to be thankful for. And the the more we find to be thankful for, the happier we become. We don't give thanks because we're happy, we are happy because we give thanks.

For what are you thankful – even in this budget week where there is sadness, unrest at home and abroad?. For who and what are you thankful?.

Soon we gather around the table.

We give thanks

We remember

We are fed

And we move out nourished, to share the love with our world.

In Acts 1: 8, Jesus tells the community of disciples, “you will be my witnesses in all Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth”. The greek word, translated here as witness can mean a person who testifies at a legal trial. In Acts it also means “one who declares the truth of God's love”. The power to be such a witness comes from God's Spirit. (Seasons of The Spirit, Congregational Life p 100)

Our witness is not only through words or acts of mercy.. sometimes the most powerful witness of the Christian community is in the testimony of the way it conducts its life together.

Acts 2: 47, reports that the community of Jesus' followers enjoyed the goodwill of all the people. “Goodwill” is a translation of a greek word that also means ‘Grace’. Perhaps such feelings of goodwill, made it easier for the body of Christ in that place to make Gods grace known to their neighbours. (Seasons of The Spirit, Congregational Life p 100)

In closing, the passage notes the community's growth. The writer declares that such transformation comes from God through the power of the spirit. This is a witness to the church in all times, about how growth is a gift of God's provision of Grace, nurture and feeding. (Seasons of The Spirit, Congregational Life p 100)

Susanna Pain