

Sermon 14<sup>th</sup> August 2022

Readings: Acts 2: 42-47 and Luke 12:49-56

There is an interesting little movie called *Agora*, it's set in the year 391 A.D; so approximately 360 years after Jesus died and was resurrected. It is based very loosely on historical figures and incidents in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. It is basically a love story however there is one scene in the movie that I find particularly interesting.

The main lead character, a young slave boy, is filled with curiosity about the Christian movement. One day while he is in the Alexandrian town square, known as the Agora, he hears a Christian monk speaking about the Kingdom of God. The monk invites him to come and see, taking him to a place where believers in Jesus are meeting together. In the meeting hall people are hearing the Scriptures but all around the building under the eaves and along the porches are all sorts of people, beggars, lepers, the blind and the elderly and there are many other people attending to their needs. The young slave is invited to share with them the bread that he has purchased for his master. In giving away what he will now have to pay for out of his own wages, he has an experience of faith and charity that changes him. He catches a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, and he becomes a believer.

This particular scene reminds me of the passage we heard today from Acts. Everything seemed so simple and easy back then, and we read that the number of people joining the believers were added to daily; wouldn't that be great to see in 2022. This picture of the very early church forces us to ask ourselves a very challenging question; how and why is it so difficult to be that kind of church today?

Well, there are lots of answers to that question but the first thing to consider is the rapid change in all aspects of the world we live in today. For instance, the changes in science and technology and the way we live, work, play and think. Commentators suggest there have been more changes in the last 20 years than in the previous two centuries combined. Many scholars call the current time period we live in, a liminal time, it means that we are caught in the middle. We can no longer live the way we did in the past, but the future seems uncertain and unknowable.

Forty-five years ago, when the young Uniting Church opened its doors, people simply streamed in. We didn't have to do anything because the social structures within society herded people inside those doors. So, in a way, we could say that no one is to blame for our current situation, it's not really anyone's fault. Those who worked so hard to form the Uniting Church and create our beautiful Basis of Union, a document full of rich and amazing foundations of faith, could not possibly have seen what was around the corner.

The church in previous centuries didn't need to advertise itself, it didn't need to be particularly obvious because people came regardless. We, on the other hand, tend to be hidden away. Does anyone really know that we are here? Does anyone out there know what we have to offer? In the movie *Agora* the fourth century church is very obvious; people can walk past and see what is happening as they stroll through the centre of town. This is mirrored in One Corinthians, chapter fourteen, Paul tells the early church not to start speaking in tongues all at the same time in case some "ordinary people or unbelievers" come in or pass by. Paul tells them that these ordinary people will think that they are crazy. I was always puzzled by this passage until I found out that the very early church gathered in open spaces

within communal houses. People would have been constantly walking through the meetings of believers on their way to their lodgings or the marketplace. The early church was visible simply because they were out there in communal meeting places.

In the reading we heard earlier this morning God tells God's people that they are to be a light to the nations. That is really difficult for us today if we never put ourselves out there or are stuck inside the four walls of a church building. Fifty years ago, and even further back in time, I often wonder if people came to church on a Sunday morning because there was nothing better to do. Today people are spoiled for choice on Sunday, they can play sport, maybe have breakfast with friends or even catch up on the housework after a busy working week. So for the first time in over a century we are being forced to consider the reason we are here as the church in the first place and how to be the church in this rapidly changing environment. I believe it is the right time to get back to basics, it is the right time to see things more clearly, to read the signs of our time. Just as Jesus called people to see and understand the signs of the time when he walked upon the earth, we too need to see and understand what Jesus' coming and his proclamation of God's kingdom means to people today.

Last week during the sermon I read out to you Jesus' first proclamation of the good news, it is basically his manifesto, the reason he has come, the reason he will be such a divisive force. Jesus speaks about freeing the oppressed which of course will really tick off the oppressors. Their way of life, which is to put it bluntly, getting rich off the backs of others, is threatened by Jesus' words of justice and righteousness. Even today those who cry out against big business, powerful politicians, the elite, and the wealthy will find themselves attacked, persecuted, and shut down. When Luke records Jesus' words for his mid first century listeners they would have understood what Jesus meant, when he said, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division". (Luke 12:51)

Jesus threatens the social order of the day. My guess is we do not notice Jesus revolutionary proclamation as much today because most of us live comfortable lives and, apart from Christians being the butt of the odd joke, no one cares too much about what we do or say. We are no longer a threat to the system.

When Jesus announces that he has come to bring good news to the poor he is speaking directly to anyone who feels like they are a nobody, to all those who don't fit into society, to the ones who have no voice, no power, no social status. When Jesus says he comes to set the captives free he is speaking to all of us because there is nothing worse than being a slave to own negative thoughts or, feeling as if we are drowning in a sea of doubt and fear. When Jesus says he has come so that the blind can see, it is the truth of God's love revealed in Christ that we are called to look at with eyes wide open.

Perhaps this liminal time, this time of uncertainty is exactly the moment that God will make new things happen; after all God will move forward with or without us. Yet God also longs for us to join in the mission, to get onboard, so that as Christ's body the church, we can bring good news to all people.

Greystanes this is our Christ given mission!

To finish, listen to this promise in Ephesians:

<sup>20</sup> God is able to do much more than we ask or think through His power working in us. <sup>21</sup> May we see His shining-greatness in the church. May all people in all time honour Christ Jesus. Let it be so. Amen.