

Sunday 19th June 2022 St Andrew's – The Church unleashed for service

In the book of Acts of the Apostles, our reading showed how the early church dealt with an issue that came up as a result of the duty felt by the family of Christians to feed the widows being a burden on the twelve apostles that impeded their work to spread the Gospel. We looked at Acts 2:41-47 last week and how the believers shared everything, and lived in a community in Jerusalem that met daily and ate together daily. This kind of community only exists today as the way of life for both Catholic and Protestant organisations that hold everything in common, and live and worship together daily. As the church got bigger, organisational issues arose. Monasticism in the second and third centuries was a development in communal living with a focus on worship and mission, with the aim to help those in need by sharing.

One of the fullest descriptions of the early church is found in a document referred to by later church fathers, but believed to have been lost in full, until found in a monastery in Sinai in the late nineteenth century. I will read part of a letter sent by Aristides to an Emperor Hadrian. It could have been written to Antoninus Pius in AD 140 (who had Hadrianus in among his names) or Hadrian in AD125. Aristides was an Athenian philosopher who became a Christian. Antoninus Pius was a good emperor and was succeeded by his adopted son Marcus Aurelius whose claim to fame is his collection of thoughts: his *Meditations* as a Stoic philosopher. Aristides wrote a long letter, called an Apology (which means a speech in one's own defence) about the various religions in the Empire, but of them all, Aristides is most impressed by Christians, and is trying to point the emperor in the right direction to learn more. However no emperor became a Christian until Constantine in AD 312, nearly 200 years later.

The fifteenth section of the letter relates to Christians – this is an edited version as it is in fact much longer.

Oh emperor, it is the Christians that have sought and found the Truth, for they acknowledge God. They do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs. They honour father and mother and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly. They do not do to another what they would not like done to themselves. They speak gently to those who oppress them, and in this way they make their enemies their friends. It has become their passion to do good to their enemies. Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And if any of them sees a homeless stranger, they bring them into their homes, under their roof. If anyone of them becomes poor while the Christians have nothing to spare, then they fast two or three days until everyone can eat. In this way they supply for the poor exactly what they need. They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him. This, oh emperor, is the rule of life for the Christians. This is how they live.

This letter was written 100 years after the foundation of the church, which had grown enormously. If you know anything about early church history, you'll know bishops had been appointed in all the major towns in the middle east and Greece, as well as Rome. The church was well established but what strikes me is how much it was the same as the church in the first few years that we see in the book of Acts. Last week we looked at the early church gathering together daily, sharing, and treating all the believers as family. Obviously by family, what was meant was a loving stable family where love abounded and all lived in harmonious relationships, though as we saw with Paul and Barnabas disagreeing about John Mark's behaviour, there could be disagreement which was unhappy initially but was healed later as Paul took John Mark with him on his journeys.

In the early church in Jerusalem all the Jewish laws were kept, plus the addition of treating all as one big family, which involves looking after everyone. In Acts 6, we see there was a daily distribution of food, and some widows were overlooked. So the apostles appointed seven wise Holy Spirit filled men to administer food distribution for widows. These were the first servants ordained (by the laying on of hands) by the apostles and is the first example of division of labour inside the church between the apostles and deacons. Later in Paul's letters he sets out how to appoint overseers and deacons to serve but he doesn't say very much about what they should do other than be full of faith, wise and knowledgeable. When speaking about servanthood in the church, I could speak about deacons and their character qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 3, but today I want us to look at what Aristides wrote about Christians. So, let's go back to his observation of Christian behaviour and see how it matches the church today.

it is the Christians that have sought and found the Truth, for acknowledge God

The Christians have found the Truth and worship God I think we agree with what Aristides wrote, so nothing contentious there.

They do not commit adultery nor fornication, nor bear false witness, nor embezzle what is held in pledge, nor covet what is not theirs.

Aristides has taken a very dim view of Greek moral standards, as well those of most of the peoples of the middle east, where sexual permissiveness, lying, cheating, and being envious of others was the norm. As it is in much of society today; as a nation we are more like the ancient world than we might like to think. But are today's Christians as pure, truthful and selfless as Aristides describes it? It may be uncomfortable to see how well we measure up to these second century Christians. Scandals are to be found in all denominations as men and women are tempted and fall short. Thank God we have Jesus so that when we make mistakes, we can try in future not to repeat them, and be forgiven when we confess our sins to Jesus. As the Lord's prayer says: "*forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*" it is up to us to forgive those who wronged us.

They honour father and mother, and show kindness to those near to them; and whenever they are judges, they judge uprightly.

Honouring father and mother has been pretty uncontroversial for the last two thousand years, but increasingly as the family unit is fragmented, parents may be less honoured and even abandoned by their children and the wider family, with the expectation that they are on their own with the State providing fallback care. It was astonishing to Aristides that these Christians showed kindness towards others and were fair judges. Living in Athens, showing kindness to neighbours may well have been uncommon as Athenians were an argumentative people who enjoyed debating so long as they won the argument. Half the population was enslaved, and slaves had to do all the work, while many Athenians had the leisure time to debate and be entertained. Rhetorical skills would be seen as useful to overturn truth, and having fancy debating skills to win a case was considered clever and not at all immoral. Being wrong or unjust didn't matter so long as the rhetoric dazzled and the bribe was sufficient to swing the judge's decision. Not so among the Christians. Truth and upright judgement were what mattered.

Moving on: *They do not do to another what they would not like done to themselves.*

Among the Romans and Greeks who followed the philosophies of Socrates and Plato, truth and upright behaviour were seen as moral virtues, but nonetheless if you were in a tight hole, any way out was seen as acceptable. Not so with the Christians. In Matthew 7:1 Jesus speaks about judging others, but in verse 12 he summarizes our relationship with others through the Golden Rule, explaining how it is applied: "*whatever you wish that others would do for you, do also for them*" (Matthew 7:12). Plato centuries earlier said, "*may I be of a sound mind, and do to others as I would that they should do to me.*" — Plato, Laws, 11.913

They speak gently to those who oppress them, and in this way they make their enemies their friends. It has become their passion to do good to their enemies.

Aristides had studied all the religions and he has observed the various adherents of all the religions he writes to Hadrian about, to acquaint Caesar of the customs of the people he is visiting on his tour of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. He really understands Christianity and highlights ***whatsoever they would not that others should do unto them, they do not to others*** More controversial for a Roman emperor is loving your enemies and doing good to them. The Roman way at this time of peace was the iron fist in a velvet glove, and to be fair, during the years of the good emperors, they did want to do good to their defeated enemies: they brought justice, order, roads, economic growth. ~~[In many ways the nineteenth century British empire was modelled on the pattern, but like the Roman empire, behind all this was greed and the desire to acquire wealth and power where the conquerors had the major share of the benefits, even if the administration was a lot better than what existed before.]~~ The legions were there to prevent dissent if it raised its head, and dealing with trouble would be brutal and bloody.

Falsehood is not found among them; and they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.

The servant attitude of the Christians in the first and second centuries is very evident to Aristides. What we have to remember is that the Welfare State is a recent invention, and it has in many respects removed the obligation to help neighbours, widows, orphans, and those in need from the individual Christian to the State. Whether this is a good thing can be debated. For the first nineteen hundred years of the Church, she had a role that has largely been taken over by the State. When the State employs people to serve the needs of those who need help, it formulates laws to make this happen, and provides money to pay those “servants” of the State. The one word missing from every law of the land regarding welfare is “love”. You cannot legislate to force people to love one another. As Aristides declares: ***the Christian who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting*** because he loves his neighbour, the widow and orphan. The reason for the Welfare State is because a lot of people failed to love their neighbours and share what they had with those in need. How did it all go wrong when at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century nearly everyone in Britain claimed to be a Christian? Most charities, mutual organisations (friendly societies, insurance, building societies, co-ops, hospitals, and pension funds) were founded by Christians who saw needs not being met by either individual Christians or the Church. The model of the early church gradually changed, especially after Constantine made Christianity the State religion of the Empire. The truth of the matter is that Britain was a nominally Christian country where the majority may well have attended church 100 years ago, but didn’t love their neighbours as themselves, didn’t consider other church attenders as family and didn’t think they should be servants of the church either. Hence the help was outsourced to the State and administered using rules in an impersonal way rather than a loving way based on what individuals in the church family could do.

How do we measure up to the statement “*And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.*”? We don’t pool our resources and live together in the kind of close community described in Acts. Jerusalem was a crowded city, in the days of Jesus with about 100,000 living in a square mile within the walls. Canterbury within the walls is about 130 acres, a fifth of the size of Jerusalem, and its highest population within the walls was about 10,000 before being hit by the Black Death. It’s never recovered from that fall in population within the walls, but of course the population has moved outside the city walls. That closeness in urban walled cities is very different from the spread-out population of any churches today in this country. Being so close, meant people were in much more regular contact with each other and far more aware of their neighbours. Do we know who our neighbours are and have we regular contact with them, so that we know if they have needs which we could assist them with? Do we give to others in need without boasting or letting anyone know that we are doing this? I’m sure many of you do, and we needn’t know about that. Matthew 6 begins: *‘Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² ‘So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.*

The next passage is relevant today.

And if any of them sees a homeless stranger, they bring them into their homes, under their roof.

How many of us would take in a stranger? A Christian stranger? We are hearing a lot about refugees and asylum seekers and how the government should be compassionate. The response from many to those who protest that the government is not doing all it should, is “why haven’t you taken in a refugee or asylum seeker yourself?” Politicians, activists, commentators, social media and letter writers have been found wanting as have bishops and others protesting that the government isn’t doing enough. The bishops’ palaces have not in been crammed full of the poor and needy in living memory. We come back to the Good Samaritan parable: on one level it exposes the hypocrisy of the religious folk in Israel with their excuses, and points out that the Samaritan, someone the Jews despised, has compassion, and takes action that the others who passed by should have done. On another level, the uncomfortable level for all of us, the parable exposes us as we try to avoid the personal responsibility to use our own money to deal with someone we come across who is unfortunate and in need. It is easy enough to point the person in need to some charity, some State organisation, someone else perhaps who “knows how to deal with these situations” so that as individuals we are not inconvenienced, and inconvenienced we would be, ourselves. It is easy enough to say we should be generous towards people when it isn’t our own money that is providing the generosity, but someone else’s. How often are we asked, “shouldn’t the church be doing something about this or that?” Jesus never says someone else should deal with what is your own duty. There are so many in need today. There are

many in what I would call real need through circumstances beyond their control, but there are many who have made bad choices in life, being unwise in their lifestyle choices and being unwise with their finances. People claiming they cannot afford necessities may well be genuine at that point in time when we come across them and the easiest solution is to hand over food or pay their bills. But is that really a solution that results in a lifestyle change to make wiser choices? Accepting Jesus as saviour and being filled with the Holy Spirit results in seeing that Godly choices instead of worldly choices need to be made. Without discernment, the application of a sticking plaster on a wound without finding out the cause of the wound, is not the answer, nor will it avoid future wounds.

Aristides goes on: *. If anyone of them becomes poor while the Christians have nothing to spare, then they fast two or three days until everyone can eat. In this way they supply for the poor exactly what they need.*

What the early church did was to *feed the poor and needy among them*, and for Christians to give away their own food if they had little, and go without themselves for a few days – which doesn't harm anyone, whatever doctors may claim. Christians and Jesus himself fasted as did the Pharisees on a regular basis. As Christians are we willing to go without so that those who are in need can be helped. Who among us is so poor himself that he can only afford to share his own food with the poor and needy and so go without himself? I would say none of us is making this kind of sacrifice.

Serving without being paid is done by most of us in our fellowship: in the café, in the church services, in prayer, in visiting, and doing things we keep to ourselves because we love one another. To the best of my knowledge no one among us is destitute and hungry. We had an appeal for the Food Bank last week... there are people who are hungry and they can be helped through the charity. That isn't how the early church behaved: it was always personal so that food bought from the shared resources of the believers was shared to all: a bring and share with a bit extra for those who haven't anything to bring and share. Bringing the extra is the act of service.

They observe the precepts of their Messiah with much care, living justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded them. Every morning and every hour they give thanks and praise to God for His loving-kindnesses toward them; and for their food and their drink they offer thanksgiving to Him.

Aristides is a witness of the early church and he paints a picture where Christians are serving one another, living honestly, loving neighbours as themselves, and behaving admirably in a society where these high standards were rarely met among everyone else.

Going on to some points to take home with you which are: (1) **If today a report were made on how Christians behave, what would it look like?** (2) **What is this narrative saying to us today?** (3) **Could the report make a difference to my life? If so, how?**

If today a report were made on how Christians behave, what would it look like?

If someone with no Christian background looked at the church today, would he see what Aristides saw? That is the challenge that faces me as well you. We do love one another, we do help one another, we do things without boasting that we don't mention to one and all. It's often only at a funeral that we find out how much was done behind the scenes and to be honest, that is how it should be. We are a church family and within the church family, many quietly go about doing good, and will get their reward in heaven by being told by Jesus "well done thou good and faithful servant". Most of the support given by the early church was for other Christians. In the passage from Acts, the deacons were appointed to look after the daily distribution of food for widows who were believers. Within the church community, we continue to serve one another. BUT, and this is a big BUT, we have over the centuries made changes to the way the Church operates. We no longer live together, share together, worship daily together and support one another as closely as the early church because we are more spread out and we are no longer one body in each town and village. Jesus would not be pleased by the theological splits and disunity in today's Church. He warns about these in Revelation 3 speaking to the seven churches.

What is this narrative saying to us today? I think it reminds us to be compassionate towards all in society, and to be more united as one body of Christians in each town and village.

Outside the church community, many of us serve those without faith in Jesus because loving your neighbour is not limited to loving your family, your church family and friends, but to those who are friendless and difficult and who

we see as draining us and perhaps abusing our generosity and kindness. We have to make hard choices in what we can do. I only wish the Holy Spirit would reveal who to help and who not to help, but I know He says *“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* (Matt 11:28-30). So when we are doing God’s work, serving others, it should not be a burden. If it becomes a burden, then we need to pray and see where we have taken on too much or allowed ourselves to be manipulated. Being generous to the poor, to the homeless, to the stranger makes one open to being manipulated, deceived, and burdened. We all need wisdom and it’s not all fine and wonderful as it is portrayed by Aristides when dealing with people, even those who say they’re Christians. It’s straightforward to help someone injured in an accident: call an ambulance, make them comfortable, or even drive them to Casualty. It’s much more difficult when you are told a tale of woe and need to judge whether the truth is being told or important omissions are made. Taking in the stranger, feeding the needy, helping those who need help requires wisdom when helping those in need. That is a duty we cannot outsource to someone else or expect someone else to do when we have the means, time, and opportunity to do this ourselves. Yes, we may get others to join us, but the joiners in the team have the same responsibility to provide the means, time and opportunity to do what is needed. That is how the koinonia or community of servants of Jesus should operate. The challenge for all of us is when and how we are to serve our neighbours as well as our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Could the report make a difference to my life? If so, how? Perhaps if there are things in the apology of Aristides that remind us of how Christians behave, and convict us that we need to address some shortcoming, then we need to ask Jesus for help to give us wisdom and guidance. There are so many needs which would require us to serve others. We all need the discernment and wisdom to enable us to serve in the ways that our Lord reveals to us, so that He is given the glory. What we do for others, we do for Jesus, without boasting because we love one another, and we love our Father in heaven.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.