

**Sunday 6th June 2021**  
**Acts 4:32-37 and John 15:9-17**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Friends, sorry I can't be with you in person today - the side effects of the Covid jab got a little bit of the best of me but I had already prepared my sermon and felt it would be a little bit unfair just to throw Ian completely in at the deep end so I've done this recording and as we turn to God's word now let us pray.

Come Holy Spirit, come with revelation and wisdom from our Father.  
Come Holy Spirit, soften our hearts to the word of God.  
Come amongst us Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

We're now halfway through our sermon series on Grace, seeking to understand more of this incredible word.

Previously we saw that grace can refer either to the spiritual gifts that God gives us by his Spirit living within us, or to God's power to sustain us particularly in hard times, and we thought how the grace of Christ is sufficient.

Today we come across a different working or a different impact upon the church. When we read about God's grace in our passage from Acts, we read "all the believers were one in heart and mind, no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own but they shared everything they had. With great power the Apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there was no needy person among them." These are the principal verses we'll focus on today and we won't simply focus on the last bit which mentions grace, as the context is important as well, to give some structure to our thinking. We're going to work in reverse order within these verses starting with the mention of God's grace.

We see here that God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all, that there was no needy person among them. In the NIV translation this is put as a separate sentence whilst in some other translations they link it to the previous sentence. Seeing the link between grace and power once more as we did, wherein the Apostles testified with great power, we're told however, all translations are united, and saying that God's grace was upon them all, and in the surrounding verses it is the collective attitude of believers that is highlighted, not simply the Apostles. So, it makes sense I think, for this to be a separate sentence so as to highlight the fact that it was God's grace upon them all which brought such radical sharing. This wasn't normal behavior, it wasn't something they worked up amongst themselves, rather God's grace nurtured a different perspective and a sacrificial way of life. We read in the surrounding verses what helped to ensure that there was no needy people, no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had, From time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the Apostles feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. When we read these verses, I wonder if you thought the early church practiced the form of communism, but in fact they didn't because we see here that the sharing was voluntary, it didn't involve all personal property only as much as was needed, and thirdly, this sharing was not a requirement to be a member or part of the church.

Nevertheless God's grace brought about our perspective and way of life, where there was continuous sharing and also extraordinary acts of sharing. These believers did have personal possessions but they did not consider them to be private possessions held exclusively for their own use and enjoyment, rather they understood what they had as belonging to God primarily and that we are but stewards of these resources. Out of this perspective, as God's grace worked upon them, we see here a group of generous people who are sensitive to the needs of others such that no one went to bed hungry because they could prevent it, no one slept on the street because they could give a bed, no one went without clothes because the members took care of one another, and the wealthy even sold property in order to ensure this reality. The wealthy who sold this property would be what we call today landlords so it wasn't that everybody made that particular choice yet everyone did have a right perspective about their possessions and gave what they could to support others.

One of our church values is Sharing, it says "Sharing our lives and the good news of God's love in word and deed". Our elders chose this because we see it as a biblical value which we are to aspire to grow in, and we see it in part within our DNA already. Yet, there's always room to grow and I'm not sure we can say that we evidence the generosity of the early church quite yet.

So, how do we grow in this? Well to know what needs there are and to be able to feel able to share those needs we need a depth of relationship of community. We know from Acts chapter 2 that the early church spent time sharing together in meals within one another's homes. Now, clearly, that's been difficult to do this past year but I wonder over the summer might we do something with one another because, here's the thing, do we care about one another, do we care enough to invest in one another, will we be intentional and will we be sacrificial? Because the outworking of God's grace upon the early church was seen in these ways and if this is to be seen in our lives then maybe we need more of God's grace upon us, to change our hearts, to change our minds, and help us to obey Jesus. After all, Jesus said "My command is this - love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

How are you going to lay down your life? Because following Jesus should be more than simply turning up to church for an hour, or switching on Youtube at home as Francis Chan says in the book we're reading this summer. In many churches you have about as much of a connection to the people who are supposedly your spiritual family as you would to someone who visited the same movie theatre as you.

So, how are you going to lay down your life? How are you going to connect with your church family? How will God's grace be seen in you?

Now, it's interesting that our value of Sharing said "sharing our lives and the good news of God's love in word and deed" Notice, we captured both our lives and the good news and this will be shared in both word and deed. We've just thought about sharing our

lives and the time we give and the needs we meet as we learn of them, but it's striking that in the midst of a short passage about meeting material needs, that we also read this "with great power the Apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." It kind of seems out of place at first, doesn't it, kind of wedged in there, yet, as our value says sharing should also include the sharing of the good news of Jesus and our words and this is important because with such a strong emphasis on being a community who share our lives with one another, on being a family together, then a potential danger arises that all our attention is given to this alone, possibly to the detriment of other things.

So, let's learn from the example of the early church. A shared community life is not the goal, it is not an end in itself, because when this becomes the goal of a church, sadly, church becomes maintenance focused, it turns following Jesus into a cozy holy-huddle which is all about us, and very inward looking as such. Alongside sharing our lives, there still needs to be sharing the good news and deep conviction of its importance, because the perspective which can say what is mine is actually God's, and so I'll be open-handed with it to help others. That kind of perspective is nurtured and sustained by a deep conviction that there was a man called Jesus, he really did die for us, he really did die for us, rise from the dead and he will return one day. Such a perspective enables a person to know that this life is not all there is, and the values of our world are not the most important values. Without a deep conviction about Jesus we won't be willing to financially give in a sacrificial way, and we won't invest time in one another, and we won't even bother to speak about our faith.

So, for example, and this is not to boast, but from the day we were married 16 years ago Gill and I have given away about a tenth of our income each year to our local church, or what some Christians call a tithe. We give up some sunny holidays, we give up various other things and we choose to have less, all because we really do believe in Jesus. Likewise we have consistently invested time in our church family wherever we've been, and before I was a minister, and we've done this because we really do believe in Jesus and that this church is his family, and so, is our family as well. A belief in Jesus and that He truly is alive even today is what helps to rightly shape our individual and corporate lives not only with a care for one another but with an outward concern as well, and I don't simply mean that we should be evangelistic, though that would be lovely, instead, what I mean is, do we have a right balance between an inward and an outward focus? Do we have a right balance between an inward and an outward focus? And this affects everything in church life. The just retired moderator of the Church of Scotland, Martin Fair, wrote an article in the March edition of Life and Work, our denominations magazine - Martin said near the end "Let it be asked of every worship service - Is it being designed with young people in mind? Let it be asked of every group and organization - Is it being run with the express intention and hope of engaging new people? Let it be asked - Of every pound spent, is this expenditure intended to keep the show on the road or to bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind?"

Now, maybe you would take issue with that last quote, particularly around worship, but we need to face facts, as Martin also said in his article, we have been declining numerically for 60 years and the decline in numbers of young people has been nothing short of catastrophic. So, let's remember that context nevertheless, in every area of church life what is the balance between an inward and an outward focus? Are we willing to right that balance even if it is costly and sacrificial to do? So, because that sounds like a choice which also needs God's grace.

Our final point today draws from the first verse of our passage which said "all the believers were one in heart and mind." This unity was of heart and mind, the heart that core place where we are driven to make our choices by both emotion and values, and the mind, the place of reasoning and identity in both spheres. There was unity, and not a superficial unity, but a real unity, a unity displayed in their way of life. What helped them reach that place of unity? What helped them to be willing to sacrifice for the other?

Well, a couple of things, firstly, in just the previous verse we can read after they prayed they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke the word of God boldly. There's that deep conviction again, that deep conviction about Jesus, and it came after they prayed and they were filled with the Spirit. Friends, are we gathering for prayer? Do you make time to come on a Thursday evening, to our time of prayer or to pray in your Fellowship Group? As we pray together, we are brought closer together, and do we pray to be filled afresh with the Spirit? After all, Paul exhorts us to do that as well, but this unity was encouraged and sought in all of the early churches such that Paul, writing to the Philippians said "Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, of any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather, in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

We see again many of the same elements as we've already spoken about this morning, but the unity of heart and mind is tied here to our unity to Jesus, and are following after his example as Paul will go on to say in that chapter. As such, what brought unity to the early church, was not warm fuzzy feelings, indeed the church was made up of groups that had previously been at odds with one another, instead, what brought unity was a new identity, a new identity founded in Jesus, and a deep sense of call to His mission. It was through this identity and through that mission they were able to focus on something greater than themselves.

I wonder, brothers and sisters, what shapes our identity first and foremost? What shapes our priorities? Is it Jesus and His kingdom?

If we are to have such unity, if we are to embody the value of sharing, then we must pursue Jesus and His kingdom first. Towards that end I do pray that God's grace will be poured out in greater measure upon us all and so may it be so, Amen.