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June 11th: Acts 4:32-37 & Luke 22:54-71

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Barnabas and the early church's charity. Peter's denial and Jesus before the council.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Acts 4 verses 32-37 The end of Acts chapter 4 expresses the unity of the Church and also introduces us to the character of Barnabas. The powerful unity of the early Church in Jerusalem is manifested in their sharing their possessions. This is something that has already been spoken of in Acts chapter 2 verses 44-45.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common, and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all as any had need. Within the ancient world it was an ideal of friendship in some quarters that people would share all their possessions. This unity of the Church, the fact that they are one heart and soul, is shown in their willingness to give to each other, to depend upon each other in this way.

The apostles bear witness with great signs and wonders to the resurrection of Christ. Their testimony to the resurrection is itself associated with an attendant witness of

confirming powerful signs. We read of these in Hebrews chapter 2 verses 3 and 4. It was declared at first by the Lord and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

The message of the resurrection then was not just words, it was confirmed with powerful signs that accompanied the apostles message. The Jerusalem Church's practice of having things in common would have had an immediate witnessing force in the context. They were selling property in Jerusalem and then giving the money to serve the Church.

On a more general level this was an expression of their desire to build up treasure in heaven. They were prepared to sell those things were most tying them to the earth and in so doing to express their commitment to something greater, the commitment of the good of the body of Christ, giving their money for that cause. But there was also the fact that Jesus had declared that Jerusalem would be destroyed within a generation.

To sell real estate in Jerusalem would be a confirmation of the prophetic witness of Christ. You can imagine a large number of the Christians in the early church in Jerusalem did this and it would lead to a quite significant change in the real estate market in Jerusalem. People would notice, they would notice that this group was suddenly getting rid of all their property in Jerusalem.

They might wonder at the reason for this practice and if they asked they would find out among other things that Christ had declared the destruction of Jerusalem within just a few decades. Beyond Jesus' statements about Jerusalem though we should pay attention to his statements about wealth more generally. Jesus spoke a very great deal about wealth and the danger of wealth, the difficulty of someone who is rich entering the kingdom of God.

He encounters the rich ruler Zacchaeus. He talks about the unjust steward and the rich man of Lazarus. All of these stories, encounters and parables have at their heart the theme of wealth.

Jesus charges the rich ruler to sell what he has and give to the poor. Zacchaeus sells a significant portion of his property and gives to the poor. The fact that there was no one in need among them looks back to Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 4 to 5 and 7 to 8. Deuteronomy 15 tells us on the one hand that there will always be poor among them but on the other hand that there will not be poor among them.

Therefore we should quickly obey the voice of the Lord your God being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today. If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need whatever it may be.

Deuteronomy 15 tells us on the one hand that there will always be poor among them but on the other hand that there will not be poor among them.

If they are faithful to the Lord. How do we bring these two things together? Well there will always be need. There will always be people in poverty and yet if Israel is generous and obeys the voice of the Lord the poor need not be left in poverty and neediness.

There will never be a point where there are not needs to be met but those needs can be met if they are faithful. Beyond this having all things in common is an expression of the spiritual unity of the church. They're one in heart and soul.

This unity expressed in the provision of goods to those who are in need within the church is not restricted to the book of Acts. This is something that we see elsewhere in the story of the church nor is it something that's a practice restricted in all ways to Jerusalem. The church is to be a place of mutual concern where when one person suffers all suffer or when one rejoices all rejoice.

In this respect it's like a family. The apostle Paul speaks about this dynamic in 2nd Corinthians chapter 8 verses 13 to 15. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need so that their abundance may supply your need that there may be fairness.

As it is written whoever gathered much had nothing left over and whoever gathered little had no lack. Paul's referring back to the manner in Exodus chapter 16 here where everyone gathered equally and had what they need. However now some have more and others less but there is an equalization through willing charity.

So the same outcome occurs. Everyone has what they need but now it's not through the initial distribution but through the willing gifts of those to whom God has given much. This is similar to the way that the one gift of the Spirit is represented through manifold gifts of the Spirit.

God makes us participants in his giving. God provides for the poor but he provides for the poor through providing others to give to them as an expression of his giving and we are told on our part that if we give to the poor we lend to the Lord that as we give to the poor we are laying up treasure in heaven. As this practice of giving is practiced between churches it's a recognition and expression of concrete unity.

This is something that's very important for Paul. The unity of the church is not just a spiritual unity of ideas or a unity that is very abstract. It's a unity expressed in eating together, in providing financial support for each other.

In Romans chapter 15 verses 26 to 27 he writes, For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem, for they

were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. It's important that this giving does not occur under compulsion.

It should not be done grudgingly either. People's goods are not forcefully expropriated and then given to the poor, nor is there some command from the apostles that they must do this. Rather it is done freely as an expression of a willing heart, just as the tabernacle was built through the devotion of free will offerings as people gave of their own willing hearts to the Lord.

So the church is being built up as a temple with the willing gifts of the people within it, not through compulsion, not through coercion, but of their own free will. And the gift has two recipients. On the one hand it's given to the Lord.

It's placed at the apostles' feet as his representatives, but it's also given to the poor. These gifts are not just some secular charity. They are gifts by which a new community is being formed, a new commonality, a new union in which rich and poor are brought together.

The heart of the giver is knit to the Lord, but also knit to his neighbour. This all serves as a sign of the unity of the Spirit. When the Lord has knit our hearts to our brothers and sisters, their needs will be seen as matters of our concern.

Barnabas is here introduced as a minor character. Stephen and Philip will be introduced as minor characters in chapter 6, and Saul in the stoning of Stephen at the end of chapter 7. Each of these three characters will become major characters in time, and the same is true of Barnabas. He will later accompany Paul on his missionary travels.

He also advocated for Saul when others were dubious about his conversion in Acts 9 verses 26 to 27. And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Christ.

We also know that Barnabas was a cousin of John Mark from Colossians chapter 4 verse 10. John Mark's family had a large house in the upper city of Jerusalem, so it's quite likely that Barnabas came from a wider family of considerable wealth and influence, and of importance within the early church. We're informed that he was a Levite, and while Levites initially did not hold tribal territory, they did have cities and surrounding lands.

However, times had changed since then, and Levites did possess land at this time in the first century. His being a wealthy Levite would also suggest some status. Judas acquired a field through selling Christ into the hands of his enemies.

Barnabas sells a field and gives the money to Christ's ministers. He is exemplary in this respect, whereas Judas is an example of someone who gives up the most valuable thing of all for his love of money. Barnabas is the exact opposite, and we can see in the following chapter that Barnabas is juxtaposed with Ananias and Sapphira too.

A question to consider, what more can we learn about Barnabas from other references to him in the New Testament? Luke chapter 22 verses 54 to 71. Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house, and Peter was following at a distance. And when they had kindled fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them.

Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, This man also was with him. But he denied it, saying, Woman, I do not know him. And a little later someone else saw him and said, You also are one of them.

But Peter said, Man, I am not. And after an interval of about an hour, still another insisted, saying, Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean. But Peter said, Man, I do not know what you are talking about.

And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.

And he went out and wept bitterly. Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as they beat him. They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, Prophecy, who is it that struck you? And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.

When day came, the assembly of the elders of the people gathered together, both chief priests and scribes. And they led him away to their council, and they said, If you are the Christ, tell us. But he said to them, If I tell you, you will not believe.

And if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God. So they all said, Are you the Son of God then? And he said to them, You say that I am.

Then they said, What further testimony do we need? We have heard it from him. Luke chapter 22 ends with Peter's denial and Jesus' trial. Peter's testing and denial is paralleled with and contrasts with Jesus' trial.

This isn't as pronounced in Luke as it is in some of the other gospels, but it is still present. Both of the two are questioned, and one is faithful and the other unfaithful. And in the story of Peter's testing, there is a gradual escalation.

First he is challenged by one of the servant girls when he is sitting at the fire in the

courtyard and she sees him in its light. She says that he was with Christ, but he denies it. Later he is accused again, someone claiming that he was one of the followers of Jesus.

Finally he is accused one more time by someone claiming that as a Galilean he was with Jesus. Note the way Jesus is seen as an outsider from the north. He's a Galilean prophet come down to Jerusalem.

He's an outsider. Peter denies it even more forcefully still, and he is tempted by the desire to fit in around the fire to avoid ostracisation for the name of Jesus. We can face similar temptations to dissociate ourselves from Christ and his people in order to fit in around the fires of our society, not to be left out in the cold.

The cock then crows and Jesus turns and looks at Peter, a detail recorded in this gospel but not others. Peter then remembers Jesus' saying and the horrified realisation of what he has done hits him. The crowing cock illustrates Peter's own pride, the pride that has now failed at three-fold testing.

Whereas Jesus has been sorely tested and succeeded, Peter has miserably failed. He now completely removes himself and weeps. Jesus' prophecy concerning Peter is fulfilled at the very time that Jesus is marked and beaten as a false prophet.

Jesus has also prophetically predicted that he would be marked and insulted in such a manner in chapter 18 verses 32 to 33. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be marked and shamefully treated and spit upon, and after flogging him they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise. Perhaps we could see some sort of parallel between Jesus and Samson.

Samson is blinded, his eyes are removed and the Philistines make mockery of him. Here Jesus has a blindfold put over him and he's marked. However, just as Samson's greatest victory was won in the hour of his death, so Jesus' greatest victory will be won under similar circumstances.

The chief priests and scribes seek to get Jesus to claim to be the Christ, the son of in order to have cause to hand him over to Pilate as a false messiah. The assembly asks him if he is the Christ. Jesus, we should remember, has been performing messianic style actions for the last few days.

He had entered into Jerusalem in the manner of a messiah. His triumphal entry, followed by the action in the temple, pointed towards a particular status that he might be claiming for himself. Jesus responds to the questioning by declaring the futility of any answer, but identifies himself once more with the son of man in Daniel's vision.

In Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. I saw in the night visions and behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man and he came to the ancient days and was presented before him and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all

peoples nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

He also alludes to psalm 110 verse 1. The Lord says to my Lord sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. In time they will have demonstration of Jesus' presence at the right hand of the father as he destroys the city and the wicked bind dressers and the rebellious subjects clearly demonstrating his authority and rule. The assembly declare Jesus to be guilty of blasphemy.

They do not have the jurisdiction to carry out any sentence though so they must deliver him over to Pilate. This trial was probably not a trial in any fuller sense of the word. It is better thought of as a hearing designed to establish charges to be presented to Pilate, the one with the authority to cast a death sentence.

A question to consider, how might the claim that Jesus is the Christ interplay with his claim to be the son of man in a way that fulfills Daniel chapter 7? How might the understanding of Jesus as the Christ and Jesus as the son of man fill each other out?