

Sunday 26 April 2026
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 2:42-47

NT: I Peter 2:19-25

Gp: John 10:1-10

'All who believed were together and had all things in common'

Our first reading, from the book of Acts, gives us a fascinating snapshot of the life of the early Christian community. They spent time in the temple; they broke bread together and praised God. And we're also told that they 'had all things in common'. They would sell their possessions and 'distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need'. Small wonder that radical Christian thinkers have seen this as challenge to wealth and privilege – even foreshadowing Karl Marx's famous dictum, 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their need'.

It would be unwise to try and deduce from this a specific economic programme. We're not given details of how this life was organised, and the disciples were not running a complex welfare state. Nevertheless, we should not glide over this part of Acts. There are challenges here we need to hear.

In the Book of Acts, Christians are called people of the Way. In other words, it is by their way of life that they become known. It is their life in community that marks them out, their challenge to gender and ethnic barriers, their refusal to serve in the Roman army, attend gladiatorial games or offer sacrifices to idols. And for these reasons, the early Christians are suspect: socially deviant, fifth columnists, potentially disloyal to the emperor.

None of this is accidental. The Christian life flows from Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. And the kingdom is not primarily a creed, but a life to be lived. Of course, it is shaped by beliefs: that Jesus fulfils the hopes of Israel, and that he is risen. But these beliefs are not private, spiritual affairs. They shape the community and the way it lives in the world. Again, the kingdom of God does not dictate a political programme. But, in the broadest sense of the word, it is political. It is material. It is social. It cannot be indifferent to poverty, war and prejudice.

And there is quite a specific challenge in this passage, one we often try to spiritualise. The Christians 'had all things in common'. This is a direct statement about how they used their possessions and their money. It echoes Jesus' uncomfortable teaching: it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Or the letter of James, which says 'Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you . . . You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.'

With Jesus, and at the beginning of Christianity, there is a profound suspicion of wealth and property. They are barriers to faith. They are linked to injustice and violence.

It's true that, over time, Christian understandings developed. Some might say that they were watered down and compromised as the church struck its bargains with earthly powers, and became an official religion of the Empire. But there were always those who offered a radical challenge to this accommodation – from the desert mothers and father of Egypt, to religious orders like the Carmelites and Franciscans, from the lay women who formed the communities in the medieval Netherlands to the Diggers and Levellers who challenged feudal property laws.

And even the mainstream of Christian teaching was clear: while private property might be allowed, in the end *nothing is ours*. Ultimately, we only have use of things in order to serve the common good. Possession is never ours by absolute right.

We can evade that teaching, for sure. We can pretend that wealth and palaces are really all there to serve society. But we know a lot of this is self-delusion or outright cynicism. We need to hear those more challenging voices, we need to hear again that the early church is defined by having all things in common and placing need before possession.

There is a clear link to Jesus' teachings in the gospel. He draws a contrast between the hired hand and the true shepherd. The hired hand is only there because they are forced to work for money. It is a transaction, an arrangement of convenience. The shepherd, on the other hand, knows the flock. They do not see the sheep as units of production, but as beings to be named and loved.

Jesus also calls himself the gate of the sheepfold. And those who do not use the gate are thieves. What does a thief do? They try to take possession. They break in and kill and destroy. Now Jesus is not talking about obvious robbers. He pitches his kingdom in opposition to the religious and political authorities of his day. They - respectable, official, revered – are the true thieves. They may disguise their theft of wealth, land and people, but they are thieves nonetheless. They are colonisers. They take possession of people's hopes and bodies.

This teaching also speaks to our abuse of the earth. We have a responsibility to care for the planet and its creatures, yes. We should not mistake this for the idea that we own them. They are not ours. None of it is. The earth and its creatures have their own being, their own ways of feeling and flourishing. Like everything else, they are not our property. And we will only continue to break in and kill and destroy if we insist on subjecting the earth to our rule, and our interests above everything else.,

'All who believed were together and had all things in common': I've focused on the challenge of these words because it is one we easily avoid. It is one that has been suppressed and spiritualised in Christian tradition too often. We forget that Jesus preached primarily not about himself but about the kingdom of God, and that the kingdom of God is not primarily a future life, but life *now* under God's alternative rule of love.

So we need to be made uncomfortable again by this teaching. At the same time, there is also a promise and a joy in these words. They remind us that we are called to fullness of community. We are not destined to isolated lives of indifference or rivalry. We are called to a way of life, a way of losing our false ego and desires so that we can rise again with Christ. In the church at its best, there is such richness of community: people from different cultures, across all generations, possessed of such varied skills and experiences, yet all one body. Rejoicing together, suffering together, bearing witness to the world that we can live differently.

We are called to that way of life through the gate of the cross. The cross which dis-possesses us, strips us of power and pride, so that we can know ourselves truly as God knows us. It is, in the end, a way of joy: 'I came,' says Jesus, 'that they may have life and have it abundantly'.

Fr Steven Shakespeare