

## **Introduction**

Dale been doing a series about living in “the last days”, so this sermon is about the “Community of the Last Days”. Since the “last days” began when Jesus, the “last One” (Rev 1:17) came to us revealing the Father (Heb 1:2), the community of the last days is all about centring on and expressing the life of Christ. The Church is no ordinary society, it is not a “club” whose members pay their dues and personally benefit from belonging. A previous Archbishop of Canterbury radically defined the Church as “the only organisation that does not exist for itself, but for those who live outside of it.” (William Temple). This definition is biblical inasmuch as Jesus came to “give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) reconciling lost people to God. The Church exists to bring people back to God. In an age of loneliness, where one in two Australians feel lonely for at least one day in a week, while one in four feel lonely for three or more days <https://psychweek.org.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Psychology-Week-2018-Australian-Loneliness-Report.pdf> to belong to a grace created Christian community is a tremendous privilege.

## **God’s Heart for community**

Having received the revelation of God in Christ we understand that the nature of God is essentially social. Father, Son and Spirit are an eternal community who welcome us into fellowship (2 Cor 13:14). God has always enjoyed the loving fellowship he has had in himself, and he wills us to enjoy communion with him *and each other* with the strength of his whole being (cf. Rev 20:9). John makes this clear when he writes, “that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). A solitary Christian is a contradiction in terms. In a world preoccupied with survival, security and wealth humanity’s greatest need is always love (1 Cor 13). Educational credentials, social status or ability to exercise spiritual gifts do not impress God, the thing which most moves the heart of God is love. The sort of love we are talking about isn’t to be equated with the love we expect to find in a natural family. The love of Christ is unique. This is what the Bible says about the extent of God’s love.

## **Christ Centred Community**

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10), “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus was emphatic about the power of love, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just *as* I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”” (John 13:33-34). This is an incredible challenge and a wonderful promise. The promise is that if we love one another with the love of the Lord it will be inescapable to the wider community that we are followers of Jesus. The second century Church Father Tertullian said that when the pagans looked at the Church they would remark with astonishment, “Look . . . how they love one another. . . ; and how they are ready to die for each other.” His comment about believers dying for one another was meant literally because the crucified Lord said “love one another: just *as I have* loved you”. The early Christians went to incredible lengths to care for one another. Clement of Rome (c.96 AD) reports,

“many among ourselves have given themselves up into bonds (slavery), that thereby they might free others. Many have...received the price, that with it they might feed others.” (1 Clement). Another early writer (Justin Martyr) speaks of a tremendous contrast between pagan and Christian life, “we used to value above all else money and possessions, now we bring together all that we have and share it with those in need.” (I Apology 16). How is such a level of love for another human being, who isn't a blood relative, possible?

It has nothing to do with imitating Christ nor keeping some sort of law, it is the fruit of sharing in the resurrection life of the Lord (Phil 3:10). There are many dimensions to sacrificial love and so many ways in which we can lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16 cf. John 15:13). From hospitality, inviting someone to lunch, to material generosity (giving money or goods), to prayer, to a phone call to see how someone is doing. In every situation in love we put ourselves second. If the values of the kingdom of God are embedded in our hearts, they cannot remain invisible. This brings us to the role of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses...to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8). When the Spirit fell on the Church at Pentecost, he released the supernaturally created a new community. One of the defining aspects of New Testament community is the sharing of spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts given to all believers were given to manifest that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3). For the world to see that Jesus died and rose again we need a Body where men and woman are receiving supernatural wisdom and knowledge, being touched by miracles and healings, hearing God speak to them through others and so on (1 Cor 12:7-11). The writer to the Hebrews says forcefully, “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:5). Paul says that such dynamic spiritual encounters are “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7).

### **Common Life**

The first Christians had a shared life that must embarrass us. The first description of the post-Pentecost Church tells us they “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44; 4:32). They had a powerful revelation from the Spirit outpoured by the exalted Jesus (Acts 2:33) that whatever comes from God is to be freely shared with others. In speaking of Christian generosity Paul says, “They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” (2 Cor 9:9 cf. Ps 112:9). From the time that the last-days Spirit was poured out on the Church (Acts 2:17) Spirit-filled Christians have been moved by this exhortation in Romans to extraordinary generosity, “welcome one another *as* Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Rom 15:7) As the Father poured out everything he had in the giving of his Son for our salvation, when the Spirit is poured out into our hearts we want to give in the same measure so others might come to Christ and grow in him. An old Christian mentor expressed this in a memorable and Christ-centred way, “it's not a matter of giving until it hurts but *giving until it hurts not to be able to give more.*”

In the Spirit a healthy local church will always be led to think beyond itself as to how others can share in our common life. Whilst one of the greatest strengths of St Marks is the care its members have for one another (1 Cor 12:25) one of our outstanding weaknesses is our struggles in mission and evangelism. In its over 100 years of existence have we ever had a full time missionary in the field?

We must prayerfully ask the Lord how we can connect with outsiders. If you are already part of a wider community group e.g. craft, health, sport, hobby, let's ask Jesus to open up opportunities to talk to members of that group about him? If you ask in faith he will give you opportunities to witness. If you have got a cooking gift ask people over to a meal then just be yourself in conversation, do what you normally, do say grace before you eat and so on. Keep visiting the lonely and always offer to pray for them (James 1:27). Its easy to run a Coffee, Chat and Conversation group on church property, but how about participating in something outside our grounds. You may not be an evangelist, but each of us can support our Gospellers (2 Tim 4:5)! Are we seeking the Lord to direct the Performing Arts Team clearly and powerfully as to how to reach out creatively? We must be interceding for the present dilemmas facing the Mainly Music leadership.

## **Conclusion**

Many churches like ours get stuck when it comes to releasing the dynamic of godly community into the world. I believe this is because we bypass the cross as the means to the glory of "the last days" (Luke 24:26). "Do *you* find it harder to generously give of your material resources or to release spiritual gifts for the good of others?" No matter how you answered the question, if by faith you place the crucified-and-glorified Lord in the middle of your life he will empower you to give, and *to give plenty*. If Jesus himself had to be killed and glorified in order to pour out the life of the Spirit (John 7:37-39) we must be willing to suffer with Christ in order to impart his life to others.

Cynics deride the common material life of the early church in Jerusalem, pointing out that within a few decades the Church there was poor and needed help from Gentile converts (Rom 15:26). I think however what explains this is that as the Jewish elite had Jesus crucified out of "envy" and later persecuted the apostles in Jerusalem out of "jealousy" (Mark 15:10; Acts 5:17; 17:5) they caused material deprivation for the first congregations. Godliness stirs up oppression. A later Roman emperor (Licinius) felt compelled to pass a law making it illegal for Christians to feed prisoners. Conversions and antagonism go together- can we face up to that?

*We* must be willing to lose anything for the progress of the kingdom of God. The anguish that some folk felt about the demolition of the Benefit (Opportunity) Shop suggests we don't understand these things very well. To be the "salt of the earth" and the "the light of the world" (Matt 5:13-15) we must be willing to lay down the very best of what God has already given us believing that the risen power of Christ will bring something greater. As I see it having been spoilt by the present Bible teaching at St Marks relatively few folks are exercising faith for a younger successor to Dale. To the degree we are willing to do this to that degree we will hear with extraordinary clarity the voice of Jesus speaking to us about our future (Rev 2:7 etc.). Finally, given the biblical exhortation, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and ball the more as you see the Day drawing near." (Heb 10:25), let us pray that all those who have joined us online during the pandemic will meet with us in person when this crisis is over? All these things are true tests of how we are living as a genuine "last days community"