

The Gift of a Fast

Introduction

The closing down of church buildings and the restriction on social gatherings has made a big impact on church life. Our reactions to this vary. I want to suggest to you that as well as the obvious losses, there are significant advantages to us in this strange time.

1. A Fast from Structures

Many churches are program churches. That is, they run programs for members and some for outsiders. The activity of the Christians in those churches is primarily directed to the programs. And many of the programs are beneficial. The “church service” is one of those programs.

But a disadvantage of a program church is that the church rarely gets to be the church.

Structures can become an end in themselves. Many groups or programs that started out as a way to help members, or build up Christians, or reach out, reach a point where they are just being maintained. And people feel an obligation to keep them going just because they may still be “good”.

But now all our programs and structures have been stopped. We could think of ourselves as being in a fast. A fast from our usual activities, groups and structures.

An advantage of a fast is that sometimes it lets you see more clearly. Like the big cities that are now smog free and people can see the mountains and the sky for the first time in a long time.

For some of us the break from programs is giving us a bit of a rest. As well as having a rest we could use this time to look again at our life as a church. In the quiet and inactivity we could think freshly about what a church could or should be doing. Indeed what it should be.

And as we do so we might want to engage in a spiritual spring clean.

2. A Rest or a Spring Clean?

Many of us have valued the weekly Sunday Zoom meetings and weekday prayer groups and Bible studies (not everyone has found them helpful, and

some haven't been able to join at all). They have provided comfort, a sense of belonging and security. For some a form of recreational activity.

However it would be a shame to waste this fasting time. We have an opportunity to see without the smog. To see a church landscape without structures. And to look into the scriptures to see what might a church be like. We have a God-given opportunity to use this down-time to repent, to clean out things that were once good but are no longer so, to set up a way of being the church that allows us to be the church in a way appropriate both to the scriptures and to the 21st century.

This opportunity has never occurred before. Something like it only normally occurs when a new church is planted.

So before we make too many plans to start up where we left off, let us look at the house of the Lord (us who gather as the Lord's people), let us look at the scriptures, let us see what spiritual spring cleaning needs to be done. Let us see if anything needs to change in us as individuals or us as a congregation.

Perhaps now is a time to brush off the overlay of activity and organisation in order to see why... and what for... and who for....

3. Spring Cleaning Agents

How shall we look at our life together? Before we get to clean up the structures where shall we look to see who we are and how we should be?

- We could go back to the start and remember the King and his Gospel, for that is where the church is founded.
- We could go back and look at the King and his disciples, for that will tell us how to live.
- We could go back and look at the King and his Spirit, for there we will find the essential life that determines everything we do.
- We could go back and look at the King and his church, for that will tell us who we are as a body and how we should meet.

And having put on all our gloves and safety equipment and armed with all the cleansers and brooms we need, we can do what was done to the church offices last week. Empty everything out and then decide what to put in.

4. Do we Dare?

This will sound very scary to many, and some will be getting angry by this stage. But a week ago one of our wardens and I visited an Anglican church building in Perth that had been closed, deconsecrated and was due to be demolished and sold. We were there to salvage some of the goods. It felt like the aftermath of a funeral, where relatives go through the house dividing up the good stuff before the rest is sent to the Sallies. It was a very sad experience.

Churches decline and die for a variety of reasons. One reason is that people hang on to what they like in “our church”. New ministers are usually aware of many eggshells (often too late) that represent the treasures of different members of the congregation. Programs, objects, ceremonies, traditions, customs, in which they or their relatives have invested large amounts of energy, time and money. Things that may have once been useful and beneficial to the King, but now are the treasure that has displaced the King and his mission.

In the normal course of church life it is very difficult to change established programs and customs. But this strange time, I believe, is a gift from God to look again. To do a spiritual Spring Clean – starting with ourselves. And it may be that we will put all the things back where we found them. But maybe not.

If your anxiety levels are even higher now than they were a few minutes ago, and you have a fear of random and uncontrolled change, I urge you to come to the scriptures with me first, and see what we can see.

We start with the King and his gospel. The others we will look at in the coming weeks.

5. The King and his Gospel.

We spent a long time earlier this year looking at the King’s Great Announcement (you could look again at your study guide or listen again to some of the sermons). The King’s Great Announcement is that astounding revelation of who is the King, of his death defeating death, his sin destroying resurrection, and his glorious ascension to the place of supreme rule over everything in the present evil age and in the age to come.

The great thing about the King's gospel is that it is to be announced to all the nations and people groups in the whole earth.

I invite you to look at some little cameos of how the King first got his gospel out among people.

a. Filled with the Spirit

To start with they are filled with the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2 we have the sequel to the promise of Jesus that the disciples would be baptised with the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit fills them they all start proclaiming the wonderful deeds of God – in other languages – so that people from all over the world can hear them in their own tongue. And many come to believe, and are also filled with the Holy Spirit.

But then what? This is an important question for us. If we too have the Holy Spirit, what now? What next? What else happens?

b. Serve and minister

In a second cameo we see (in Acts 6) the need for wise people to administer the poor relief.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." Acts 6.3

Pretty soon Stephen, one of the seven (and later Philip), is caught up in proclaiming the message, not administering the poor relief (or maybe he did both).

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, ... But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. Acts 6.8-10

The poor relief is presumably done by others. Stephen and Philip are moved by the Spirit to another ministry. Notice how much the Holy Spirit is involved

in all this. But ministry, service, is one of the things they do when the Spirit is directing them.

c. Taught by apostles

But before this, and afterwards as well, the disciples were taught. That was one reason the apostles wanted others to sort out the poor relief (Acts 6.4), so they could keep on praying and teaching.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2.42

The apostles taught the new disciples the same as Jesus had taught them (Lk 24.45-49): what the Old Testament promises were, how they pointed to Jesus as the Messiah and were fulfilled in him. How they help us understand who Jesus is and what he did.

Teaching is crucial for disciples to understand what's what; what to do; how to live; what's not right. Or as Paul put it to Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Tim 3.14-17

d. Telling the good news anywhere

In a fourth cameo some time later, we see that disciples have found their way up north as far as Antioch. And they start telling the gospel to people who are not Jews.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. Acts 11.19-21

Ordinary people are involved in this cameo. They tell the gospel informally as they had opportunity. No doubt there were others like them doing the same thing.

What do these cameos tell us? The filling of the Spirit is seen in action in a variety of ministries. The ministries are strengthened and guided by the teaching that comes from the apostles. And the disciples are empowered into gospeling by the Spirit. The Spirit and teaching strengthen and empower ministry and gospeling.

In the meantime there has been serious persecution and harassment of the church, one apostle at least has been executed, Stephen has been stoned to death, and the believers in Jerusalem have been expelled and scattered.

What has kept them going? And what might keep us going, or get us going, we who are not being persecuted, but are in a serious spiritual confusion. The energy that is put into programs and groups and events, is it also put into evangelism? Is gospeling off the table, suppressed, or ignored in the activities and groups you are in? If it is how might this change? Is it off the table in your life? Do you have Holy Spirit energy for ministry and gospeling? Are you tired, or discouraged, or just not sure?

The key to this ongoing telling of the gospel is a prayer meeting that occurred after the apostles were warned off from speaking about Jesus. You can see it near the end of Acts 4. The disciples gather everyone together and pray. Listen to their prayer.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

24 When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. 25 You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
26 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.

27 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. 28 They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. 29 Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. 30 Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. Acts 4.23-31

There are four things to note here.

1. They raised their voices together. The word translated “together” has overtones of strong bonds and passion. They really were together in heart and spirit on this.

Why? Because

- they knew Jesus was the Lord of all;
- he had sent them to tell the news;
- the Spirit had come upon them;
- they had seen the power of the gospel in action.

2. They prayed that the Lord would give them boldness to keep on speaking, ie to keep on doing what he told them to do in the first place.

3. They prayed that the Lord would keep on stretching out his hand to do powerful works in his name (which is what had got them in to trouble in the first place). Does this seem remote to us? If we think of raising the dead and healing congenital lameness, maybe so. But what about calling on the Lord for all the unbelieving spouses represented in this congregation? Or for all the children and teenagers caught up in the powerful web of social media. How old does one have to be, to be filled with the Holy Spirit and have fire in their belly for the Lord Jesus and his gospel? Might not the Lord stretch out his hand to these people?

4. The speaking was done because the Holy Spirit filled them and they spoke.

These things were written for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. For us who are still the bearers of the King's great Gospel. Who are still the people of his Spirit.

6. Preparing to Spring Clean

Before we get to spring clean anything, let us put on these shoes of the gospel. Shoes that include the great speaking Spirit in us. Shoes that are prepared with the gospel in our heart and mind and on our lips. And shoes that lead us to passionate united prayer for boldness to speak and the plea to God to act in power.

Let us not waste this fasting time.

We only have this week to start on this. Are there any other disciples in St Mark's that you can join with (or have joined with) to pray something like the prayer in Acts 4?

What might change if we prayed like this with passion and unity, and God answered?

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