

Called to be witnesses – living like Jesus

8 May 2022 – Easter 4

BIBLE READINGS

[Acts 1:8 – the theme verse for the whole book of Acts ...](#)

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

[Acts 2:42-47 – a brief description of how the new Christian community lived](#)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

[Acts 4:32-35 – a further description of the early Christian community ...](#)

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. For 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.

[Acts 9:36-39 – remembering the love of a practical woman ...](#)

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became ill and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, 'Please come at once!' Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood round him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

MESSAGE Called to be witnesses – living like Jesus



There is a well-known saying that ‘actions speak louder than words’, meaning that the real attitudes of a person or an organisation come through more in what they do rather than what they say.

And that’s the problem that I have with many politicians who make good sounding proposals but often act in hard-hearted ways. I have seen first-hand the effects of Australia’s policies on refugees and

asylum seekers.

The **words** from both Liberal and Labor are that we need to keep our borders strong and stop drowning deaths at sea. That is why each of the major parties backs offshore detention of refugees who arrive by boat.



It all sounds fairly reasonable, but the problem is that the **actions** of both parties have been exceedingly cruel and mean-spirited ... locking up thousands of asylum seekers in offshore and onshore prisons for years and years despite them breaking no laws, preventing them from receiving medical treatment even when they were brought to our cities for that very purpose, referring to them by a number rather than dealing with them as people, and until quite recently having no plan to find a permanent home for any of them, leaving them stuck in limbo. Just this week, a dozen asylum seekers were sent to Christmas Island from Melbourne’s Detention Centre for failing the government’s character test. Seems so ironic ... but also cruel.

So yes, in this case, actions speak much louder than words ... and those actions show that we are a cruel country lacking in compassion, hospitality and grace.

James, the brother of Jesus, puts it this way ...

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not do anything to show you have faith. Can that kind of faith save you? If you know someone who hasn’t got any clothes or food and you say, ‘I hope it all goes well for you. I hope you’ll stay warm and have plenty to eat.’ What good is it to say this if you do nothing to help? Faith that doesn’t lead to action is effectively dead and useless. (James 2:14-17)

Witnesses **speak** and they also **act**.

Francis of Assisi is credited as saying ...

Preach
the Gospel
at all times.
If Necessary,
use words.

~St. Francis
of Assisi

- First, we have no evidence that Francis ever said this.
- Second, we do have plenty of evidence that Francis preached – using words – a lot. He trained people to be preachers. The images of him speaking with birds is likely him practicing what to say to the rich and well-to-do whose houses and parties he would often visit.
- Third, this saying sets up an unfortunate **either/or** approach to witnessing. The evidence we have of Jesus and the early Christians is a **both/and** approach. They demonstrated the gospel through their **actions** – healing the sick, welcoming and providing hospitality to the poor and excluded, feeding the hungry – and they **also** proclaimed the gospel through their **words**. So words and actions go together.

[illegible]

First they **worship** and **pray** together, and the apostles **teach**. These practices were no doubt learned from observing Jesus and provide the spiritual foundation for a life of faith. They are part of fulfilling the first and greatest commandment according to Jesus, which is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Note that these were communal activities.

Next is the strong sense of **unity**. The readings describe the community as being of one heart and soul, and that they were each devoted to the fellowship or *koinonia*. They **shared** their resources such that there were no needy or poor people among them, even selling their possessions so that the funds could be distributed to those in need. This implies both a **generosity of spirit** and a **trust in the leadership**. They were living out the second great commandment of loving your neighbour as yourself.

Then there is their **hospitality** – they shared meals together and ate with glad and joyful hearts. Again this priority on hospitality and welcoming everyone to your table – whether rich or poor – was something observed from and modelled on the practice of Jesus.

There is no suggestion, though, that everybody contributed to the life of the community in the same way. Instead, people were encouraged to contribute their personal **gifts** and **talents**.

- So the apostles who had spent the most time with Jesus did most of the **teaching**
- The women probably did most of the **hospitality**
- And in the person of Dorcas, we see someone who used her gift of **making clothes** that she shared with others

Acts 4 states that great **grace** was upon them, a defining feature of the ministry of Jesus, responding to any need that arose.

A second century theologian, Tertullian, reports how those **outside** the church described the Christian community in glowing terms ...

‘See how they love one another’.

Perhaps this all sounds too good to be true, that Luke is painting an unrealistic and unsustainable picture of the early community, that he is looking back through rose-coloured glasses. This may be the case, but Luke also includes reports of heated arguments and conflicts arising in the community, so it wasn't all smooth sailing.

Some people worry that the community-centred lifestyle sounds a bit too much like **communism**, which is of course a modern political concept that was unknown in the first century. What was extremely **radical**, however, was the idea of the rich sharing their resources with the poor. Again, this very counter-cultural practice most probably stems from the teaching and challenge of Jesus. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, he recalls Jesus saying ...

Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those weeping, and those excluded or defamed because of their association with Jesus ... but woe to the rich, those who are full now, those who laugh, and those who are publicly praised. (based on Luke 6:20-26)

Joining the dots of Luke's story, he infers that the presence of God's Spirit among the community changed their hearts and enabled them to live in this radical and caring way.

So what are we to make of this aspect of witnessing **through our actions**?

First and foremost, it's a really important part of our witness, whether as individuals or as a community of faith.

People see how we live.

People see how we treat each other and our neighbour.

People often want to see how we care for others before they listen to what we have to say.

Second, it's interesting to see how well our programs line up against the characteristics we observed in the early Christian communities.

Do they exhibit a love for God and a love for neighbour?

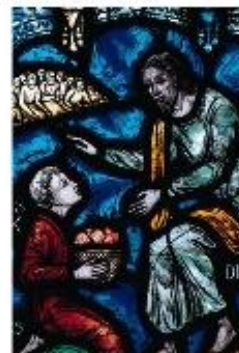
Do they demonstrate generosity, hospitality to all and grace?

And do they allow people to contribute their various gifts?

Whether we think of the Tuesday meals program here, or Helping Hand, or Playgroup or Drop-In I think the answer is a resounding 'yes'! Our programs do

To Give Witness To Jesus

Witness is an attesting to the truth of something by words or actions. We give witness to Christ by imitating in our everyday lives what Jesus would say or do.



demonstrate that we are living like Jesus through our actions.

Third, though, acting with love and compassion towards others is **not unique** to Christian faith. People from other faiths and people with no faith at all can and do act with great compassion and love towards others.

It's why our witness through **action** needs to be complemented through our **words**.

Our actions of love demonstrate that we are people worth listening to, so we need to be prepared, as the apostle Peter suggests, to always be ready to give the reason for living the way we do. If a friend asked you this and gave you 60 seconds to respond, what would you say?

It's worth thinking about.

Why do you follow and trust Jesus?

How does his life influence and inspire yours?

I want to finish by coming back to Mother's Day ...
I wonder what we learned from our mothers – and from other significant women in our lives – through **their actions**?

This will be different for each of us, and may be difficult for some.

What I learned from my mother was the importance of caring for people, of feeding people, of showing kindness, being generous wherever you could and not being afraid to use the gifts and talents you have.

So let us remember mothers today – and the demands on mothers that never seem to end and that seem to have only increased – especially through the last two years – and let us be thankful.

May their actions point us towards the example of Jesus.

