

Life after Jesus

Acts 2: 1-21

True story: - In 1926, a wealthy Toronto lawyer named Charles Vance Millar died, leaving behind him a will that amused and electrified the citizens of his Canadian province. Millar, a bachelor with a wicked sense of humour, stated clearly that he intended his last will and testament to be an “uncommon and capricious” document. Because he had no close heirs to inherit his fortune, he divided his money and properties in a way that amused him and aggravated his newly chosen heirs. Here are just a few examples of his strange bequests:

He left shares in the Ontario Jockey Club to two prominent men who were well known for their opposition to racetrack betting.

He bequeathed shares in the O’Keefe Brewery Company (a Catholic beer manufacturer) to every Protestant minister in Toronto.

But his most famous bequest was that he would leave the bulk of his fortune to the Toronto woman who gave birth to the most children in the ten years after his death.

This clause in his will caught the public imagination. The country was entering the Great Depression. As people struggled to meet even their most basic economic responsibilities, the prospect of an enormous windfall was naturally quite alluring.

Newspaper reporters scoured the public records to find likely contenders for what became known as The Great Stork Derby. Nationwide excitement over the Stork Derby built quickly.

In 1936, four mothers, proud producers of nine children apiece in a ten-year time span, divided up the Charles Millar’s bequest, each receiving what was a staggering sum in those days - \$125,000. Charles Millar caused much mischief with his will. This was his final legacy to humanity.

When Jesus of Nazareth left this earth, he bequeathed a different kind of legacy to his followers.

He left his Holy Spirit - to comfort, to guide, to empower them to be all that God had called them to be. Today we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit on the church.

After the crucifixion, the disciples had been afraid for their lives and locked the door of the upper room when they met together. Now they were afraid no longer. The coming of the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples from fear to confidence. The Holy Spirit gave them the courage to go out into Jerusalem and to declare the resurrection of Jesus to a city whose people had so recently called for his death.

The Peter we read about Acts seems very different from the Peter of the Gospels. The Holy Spirit has refined and honed his good qualities and pared away the bad.

The courage to speak out, for example, remained, but the words spoken are no longer impetuous and without thought, but cogent, considered and wise.

But he was still Peter. The Holy Spirit had not destroyed his essential self and replaced it with something new and alien. His basic personality remained the same, but had been refined and strengthened, so that he became closer not only to what God wanted him to be, but closer also to what he himself wanted to be.

Peter's undoubted courage was demonstrated on several occasions in the Gospels, but while Peter trusted in his own strength, it inevitably let him down at the crucial time and led him to deny Jesus.

This same courage, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, became infinitely dependable and sure.

In today's reading we heard how Peter quoted the prophet Joel who said that God's Holy Spirit will be poured out upon all who believe.

The Holy Spirit does not invade us unasked, but, if we truly wish to receive it, it is there for each one of us for the asking. And if we truly want the Holy Spirit to enter our lives, it will be because we want to change and will welcome the changes that the Spirit will bring. It will also mean that we have recognised our inability to bring these changes about on our own and have realised our need for God's grace.

If the Holy Spirit had not come upon the apostles at Pentecost, it is probable that Christianity would never have spread very far. Those who had known Jesus and followed him would have held on to their belief, certainly for a while, maybe to the end of their lives. At best Christianity would have lingered on as a sect of Judaism, which was itself a minority religion not actively seeking converts. Possibly in time Christianity would have merged back into mainstream Judaism.

Today we live in a country where religious observance is a minority activity. Many churches are experiencing falling congregations, and those who make up those congregations are growing older and by and large, are not being replaced with younger members.

The population of this country is growing, but churches are closing and there is a shortage of ministers. In Scotland at the moment, we are easily 30% under strength of ministers, with that figure set to rise to 47% in 2023, just 2 years from now. Unless we can reverse this trend, we may reach a situation when our worship is very differently from what we do at the moment.

Erasmus, the famous Renaissance scholar, once told a classic story which was designed to emphasize how important it is that we take up the torch of Christ's ministry with great commitment. In the story, Jesus returns to heaven after his time on earth. The angels gather around him to learn all that happened during his days on earth.

Jesus tells them of the miracles, his teachings, his death on the cross, and his resurrection.

When he finishes his story, Michael the Archangel asks Jesus, "But what happens now?" Jesus answers, "I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. They will declare my message and express my love. These faithful people will build my church." "But," responds Michael, "What if these people fail?"

What then is your other plan?" And Jesus answers, "I have no other plan!" As the body of Christ, we, like the apostles, are charged with sharing the Gospel.

It is up to us to bring to today's world this wonderful, glorious Gospel of love, salvation and redemption that has sustained and comforted people for 2000 years. Jesus is counting on you and me. But the good news is, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit is here to melt us, mould us, fill us, and use us.

At Pentecost nearly 2000 years ago, the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak in the language their listeners needed in order for them to hear and understand. I don't know if this was literally the ability to speak in different languages, or whether the Holy Spirit was so powerful in them that the need for language was transcended, allowing the Holy Spirit to speak directly to the heart.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us find this language. We have a message to deliver - it is quite literally a life or death message - but for some reason we do not seem to be very effective in delivering it.

We need to find the language that will speak to people today, that will reach out and touch their lives and their hearts. We need to do this both as individuals and collectively as a church.

If we try to do it in our own strength, we will almost certainly get it wrong. We may try to hold on to things we ought to change or change things we ought to hold on to. We may be tempted to tell people what we think they want to hear, rather than what God knows they need to hear.

If we trust in God and let his Holy Spirit guide us, we will be able to give God's unchanging, eternal message of love in a way that is new and fresh.

Jesus did not tell his disciples that they would not have problems. In fact, their problems would dwarf most of our problems. What he did promise them was peace of mind. He would send upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit to give them courage and comfort. They would be warriors and not worriers. And that is the same promise Christ offers us today. Amen.