

+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we move onward through the season of Easter our readings give insight into how the new church grew in the wake of the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The Acts passage picks up after Peter's speech, when empowered by the Holy Spirit he spoke boldly before the crowd convincing many with the fervour of his faith. Three thousand people were baptised. This was a phenomenal moment when the disciples, now become apostles – ones sent out on a mission, realised the impact of Jesus' death and resurrection for the whole world, not just the Jewish people in Jerusalem. Remember the occasion here in Acts is the post-resurrection event of Pentecost, so the whole city of Jerusalem was filled with people from across the Roman Empire.

Jesus' words and actions when he was alive gained a new context here in Jerusalem when three thousand people were baptised. Peter and the others would have remembered when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman, when he healed the Syrophenician woman's daughter, when he moved beyond his territory and own people. His message was for them as well as for the people who jealously guarded their God and kept this one God within the tight framework of the circumcision.

The church begins here at Jerusalem and moves outward into the world. They learned from the apostles the practices that Jesus taught; the breaking of bread, prayers, sharing of possessions and charitable giving to and caring for those in need.

These same practices form the core work of the church today – even if in our current circumstances they are limited by distance and social isolation. While we are struggling in these circumstances to be the church that we know, we are learning still to be the church. We are still praying, still sharing and caring. We're not able to share the bread like the new Christians did in the fervent post-resurrection days, although from the Acts passage we learn that when they were

not in the temple together they broke bread at home, eating with glad and generous hearts. We can still eat with thanks at home, even if not as a sacrament, and we can praise God.

These core activities of praying and praising God, caring and sharing are more important now than ever. Things are changing again for us in the environment of COVID-19. Indeed, it seems things are changing every day. More places are opening up again and I don't think it will be that long before the church will be allowed to resume its usual activities, including Sunday worship. Aren't we fortunate to live in Australia during the pandemic, even more so living in South Australia? It seems our former way of life will return sooner than in many other parts of the world, especially in the more densely populated cities of America and Europe.

People everywhere are learning from this experience: governments, society, communities, families, individuals. Mistakes have been made and changes come about in the way we function and relate to each other. It will be hard to go back to how things were before. How quickly we have been forced to make drastic social adjustments. Human touch has just about disappeared outside of intimate relationships. We stand behind marked lines and on taped crosses on the ground to speak to people in shops. We stand well apart from one another in an artificial bubble of individual space. We lock our elderly people behind closed doors to protect them from disease even as in doing so we cause deep harm to fragile lives, both their own and their loved ones.

As a church we can learn many things from our time of separation. The definitions and boundaries of community are different now than they were before. There is no clear sense of where belonging to the church community begins and ends. The periphery is blurred, feathered perhaps – a permeable space of movement in and out. I think this different sense of belonging to a church has been created by online church services. It's a remote sensation being a priest in this online

environment when I am here in the church and you are at home or somewhere else at your own time when you are ready. It's hardly satisfying to celebrate the eucharist when only I can partake physically of the sacrament. The experience of the early church helps us here.

In the early church the people gathered in private to break bread – not because of the fear of disease as we today, but because the new Christian religion was considered suspect. Followers did not revere the Roman emperor as a god. There was a different focus on salvation, a liberating message that released the people from certain duties and obligations to do with the state. News of someone risen from the dead would surely travel to the far ends of the Empire. No longer were people bound to the acts of ritual sacrifice to honour and appease the gods. Jesus Christ was the new covenant between God and human beings, between heaven and earth.

And here we are today in a new and different world again from the early followers of Jesus who were baptised after Peter's speech and tried to make sense of the Son of God risen from the dead. We're still trying to make sense of the Son of God risen from the dead. What does it mean for the people emerging ever so slowly from the pandemic of COVID-19, from the brink of the apocalypse of modern life?

When we are free to resume the usual activities of the church will we still project ourselves online? You need to tell me if this is a worthwhile thing, a means of nurturing the periphery of belonging to the body of Christ, the fluid boundary, the precious place where Jesus walked and where his most profound acts of ministry lay. In the periphery Jesus gave the water of life, he healed the mentally tormented people, touched the people afflicted with contagious disease... Imagine where Jesus would be today. Would he be behind the taped line in a shop separated by marked crosses on the floor? Would he withhold his hand, his sacred touch from the people who longed to be released from suffering?

As Jesus himself says to the disciples on the night of his betrayal, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' (John 13.33) Jesus goes, hand outstretched, embodied as the new commandment into the unknown environment.

The virus will be over soon, at least the isolation and separation from others will be over soon. What next for the church? The risen Jesus is the shepherd and pastor. He will show us the way, but we need to dig deep for the faith to let him lead. We are so used to being in control, but just now we are learning that there are many things to do with life and death that we cannot control. God knows this and has always known it, which is why God sent Jesus into the world. The world has long departed from faith and the humility we used to know, the humility that brought Jesus to the feet of the disciples, to the cross of crucifixion. We are now learning many things to do with humility that make us think deeply about God, about the world and environment, climate, indigenous people.

The worst thing that could happen following the COVID-19 crisis is that things returned to exactly as they were before. I don't think this will happen. I don't think the church can return to where it was before. The periphery of belonging is creating a new community of Christ. Think about this space and pray for insight as the world changes yet again and calls us back into the short-lived comforts of a materially based and consumer-oriented lifestyle. We can choose to go backward again into that way, or we can release our spirit into Christ's space and let him guide us, our shepherd and pastor.