

**8 April 2018 - Acts 4: 32-35, John 20:19-end, Psalm 133.**

*AIM: What does it mean, to be of one mind? (Reimagining Britain)*

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Last week Mark encouraged us to be disturbed. To embrace those times when our expectations and perceptions are shaken up. To see them as an opportunity to respond in a distinctive Christian way. To look for God at work in our lives and discern the choices he wants us to make. If you weren't able to be here, an audio version is available through the website. Mark's words were prompted by words he himself had heard from Bishop Lee at a service in the Cathedral. It is a message which seems particularly relevant in troubled and changing times. It is a message taken up in a new book by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in which he takes a close look at our nation in the current climate.

Reimagining Britain is the Archbishop's response to the times in which we live. It has been prompted in part by Brexit. The referendum result in 2016 was, for many, unexpected and unwelcome. It has started us on a path which will, whatever the outcome, disrupt our lives. Justin Welby comments that we have started on a journey that is taking place against a backdrop of great economic, political and technological change. A journey on which the values, virtues and practices of our nation may be reshaped. Like the Victorian reformers of public health and education, or those rebuilding the country after the second world war, we have an opportunity to reimagine our society. The Archbishop, draws upon our Christian heritage and applies it to questions that we face today. It is not a primarily a religious book. It is a radical and practical approach to life in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But, as you might expect from an Archbishop, his observations are supported by biblical references and Christian truths. It is an interesting and inspiring read, and one which I strongly recommend.

The people of early church were also undergoing a time of change and reimagining. The followers of Jesus, meeting in the days and weeks after the resurrection had had their values and culture shaken to the core. The Messiah had arrived, but not in the way they had expected. Rather than political and military conquest, he had been subject to torture and crucifixion. Despair turned to joy at the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, but life was not easy.

Earlier in this chapter from Acts, we learn that Peter and John had been called up before a council of rulers, elders and scribes in Jerusalem after performing miracles and preaching. They were ordered not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Against this turbulent background, the believers pray to God for boldness to speak in the name of Jesus against the express wishes of those in political power. The believers lead lives which are distinctively different, spending time together, praising and thanking God in the Temple, sharing food and, as we learn in today's passage, selling their possessions and pooling resources.

So, what does this passage teach us about how we are to live today? Can we, as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians, live distinctive lives following Jesus? At first reading this seems to be a passage about money. If I'm honest, it makes me feel a little uncomfortable and smacks rather too much of communism. I am no economist, so in search of help I turned to my Archbishop. Particularly to the chapter entitled "Economics and Finance."

Faced with changing times, the Archbishop says, we are to look for values in our history and culture of western Christianity. We can apply these values to all areas of modern life. By testing our ideas against these values, we can formulate a cohesive strategy and vision for the future. Justin Welby suggests three groups of values under the headings Community, Courage and Stability. We need to approach our financial dealings, whether personal or public in a way which builds a stable community. Where success depends not simply on the amount of profit, which can be measured, but on fullness of life for everyone, which is much less easy to quantify.

He says that imposing rules about sharing does not lead to a stable community as it leads to resentment and mistrust. People are creative, we are made in the image of God. If channelled wisely, creativity can lead to healthy

competition and growth. If suppressed, he suggests, it can lead to struggles for power and influence at the expense of the common good.

The Archbishop's response to our economic situation, is based not on this passage, but on the parable of the talents found in Matthew chapter 25. A man goes away leaving his slaves each with a different amount of money to look after. On his return the first two slaves have put their money to good use and made profits. They are rewarded for their endeavours. The third buried his money and returns the same amount to his master. He is punished. He has not made use of the resources entrusted to him. The vision for the economy of our nation is one where everyone creatively uses the skills and resources entrusted to him for the benefit of the whole community. Coming together to grow a stable community where benefits are experienced by all, whatever their circumstances.

As I read more, I discovered that Justin Welby quotes the passage we have just heard elsewhere in his book. Speaking of this group of believers, he refers to a sense of voluntary commonality of goods and gifts. He sees a sharing and flourishing community that gathers up the weak and strong, enabling all to benefit from all. These people lived in a particular time and place and that is reflected in the way they approach communal living. However, we should not dismiss the passage as irrelevant to modern life. He says of their approach, *"It happens seldom, but it happens. When it does, there is the experience of abundant life."*

Our circumstances may be different, but we still need to apply Christian values. Values which place community and the common good above acting purely to achieve the greatest profit. Values which encourage boldness through competition and creativity, so that we can approach challenges of new technology and build new trading relationships with confidence and flair. Values which promote a stable economic climate. Some of these things may lead to practices which seem to be counter cultural in our society which so often measures success in terms of financial profit or influence on a global stage.

We read in the passage in Acts that the members of the early church were "of one mind". All were supportive of their distinctive way of living. All agreed that they had to preach in Jesus name, that they had to obey God, even when under threat from those in power. Similarly, if there is to be radical change in the way we do things, we too must be "of one mind". There needs to be unity. And to be united, we each have a part to play. This is not something we can leave to political and economic leaders. We need to get alongside them. Accepted culture can and does change. Culture changes when society takes change on board. Often a change in public opinion can be the catalyst which is needed.

This week saw the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King. A man who stirred public opinion to further his campaign for civil rights through non-violent protest. Similarly, we are starting to see a change in culture in the USA today, particularly amongst young people, in the battle for stricter gun control laws. In our own country the general public has radically changed its approach to plastic waste partly in response to issues raised in the Blue Planet television series last year.

Justin Welby proposes practical changes in many areas of life in Great Britain. There are too many and they are too detailed to speak of here. As practice and policy develop over the next twelve months and in the years and even generations beyond, we must each decide how and in what way we wish to support and promote them. Like the community of believers in Acts we need to pray for boldness and strive for a unity of purpose.

The Psalm set for today is Psalm 133 which is said to have been written by King David, a man who was all too familiar with how relationships can be broken through conflict. It starts,

*"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity,  
It is like precious oil on the head,*

*Running down upon the beard,  
Upon the beard of Aaron."*

It is a reference to the anointing of priests, who would be drenched in oil to symbolise that they had been set apart for God's work. Oil was poured all over the head as all aspects of the priest's life were to be set apart for the Lord. All the oil is flowing in the same direction as we all want to follow God's plan. Each drop has a role to play to complete the immersion. As people of Great Britain, we all want a welcoming and prosperous nation. As people of the Kingdom of God, we all want to follow his will and discern his plan for us.

If the Vicar, the Bishop and the Archbishop are all giving similar messages, I suggest that God is at work here. We will be disturbed over the next twelve months and beyond. It is up to us to listen, pray and act, so that we become active participators in this work.

Kathy Kilgour April 2018