

Care (Acts 4:32-35)

What is needed to make a church a caring church? Open handedness. That is a generosity that is willing to use your own resources for the good of others. That was the example of the early church as we will see in this talk.

Prayer-Care-Share

At the moment we are looking at the three main aims of what we think God is calling us to do as a church: Prayer, Care and Share.

Last week we looked at prayer and particularly at the prayer of the church in Acts 4. We saw that prayer is about opening our eyes:

- opening our eyes to God's people
- opening our eyes to God's character
- opening our eyes to see that God is bigger than our problems
- opening our eyes to see God's mission.

This week we are looking at care and in particular how we are called as the family of Christ to care for one another in the church. And to help us think about this we are looking at the next part of Acts 4, where the early church in Jerusalem is described.

And the most striking thing is that because of people's incredible generosity, no-one was in need among them.

Care means being Open-Handed

Prayer requires us to be open eyed to God, care requires us to be open-handed to the needs of our church community.

Sometimes when people are reluctant to give away or spend their money, we might call them 'tight'. This is short for 'tightfisted.' The image is that they won't let go of their money, they are grasping it for themselves.

The opposite of being tightfisted is being 'open-handed'. In other words being willing to share or spend your wealth for others, rather than hoarding it all for yourself.

The early church was certainly open-handed. It even says that when the need was great people would sell property and give the money to the church to be used to help those in need! This is being truly open-handed. This is generosity at its height.

And of course such openhanded care still occurs amongst Christians today. When I asked in these week's survey about Care for specific examples of Christians caring for others during the lockdown, there were a number of examples including:

When my daughters family had covid her friends shopped for her and took it to their home

I have been impressed by the amount of money given to the Thanet Winter Shelter, £15,000 in two months since a Justgiving fundraiser was launched two months ago. Also by the number of people who have come forward, and are still coming forward to volunteer for TWS this winter. This includes outreach work for the homeless who still choose to sleep rough, on the streets rather than in a shelter.

Requests for practical help e.g. " the Carer can't open my key safe, can you come and help? "
Also church family giving donations of money and food for the Food bank.

Now of course, this might mean being openhanded with our money, but it can also mean being openhanded with our time or energy, our gifts or talents. If we are serious about caring for others, then we need to be willing to let go of things that we hoard for ourselves.

To be caring we need to be openhanded. Let's look at three reasons we should be openhanded as Christians.

Open Handed is a response to the gospel

Firstly, to be open handed towards others is a natural response to the gospel. It is notable that in Acts the open-handedness of the Christian community goes alongside the powerful preaching of the apostles about Jesus. The two are strongly connected.

Indeed, the more we understand the gospel, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, then the more inclined we will be to be openhanded. There are two aspects of the gospel that particularly push us towards being openhanded with each other.

A Gospel of Sacrificial Love - Phil. 2:6; cf. 2 Cor. 8:9

Firstly, it is a gospel of sacrificial love. Jesus did not hold on to his riches, but gave them up for our sake. Two verses in Paul's writings make this very clear. First a verse from our Affirmation of Faith this week about Jesus:

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped," (Philippians 2:6)

He didn't 'grasp' equality with God, but open-handedly gave it up so he could come to earth as a human being and die on the cross for our sakes.

If our very salvation, if our hope of eternal riches is based on Jesus being open handed for our sakes, then surely we too need to be openhanded. Not grasping on to the things that we think belong to us to be kept for us, but willing to give them up for the sake of others.

This is just the attitude that describes the early church in Acts:

"No-one claimed that any of their possessions were their own..." (Acts 4:32)

A Gospel of Reconciliation - Phil. 2:1-2; 1 Cor. 1:9;

It goes on to say,

"...but they shared everything they had." (Acts 4:32)

This links with another aspect of the gospel that should cause us to be 'openhanded'. It is a gospel of reconciliation.

The Greek word for 'shared' has the same root as the Greek word for 'fellowship' or *koinônia*. The sharing is not linked to a political ideology like communism, but to the idea of a new connection, a new relationship, or a new family.

Indeed, this links to the gospel, because the New Testament describes our new relationship with God, which Jesus makes possible through his death and resurrection as a 'fellowship':

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose." (Philippians 2:1-2)

Notice that the 'fellowship' with the Spirit is a parallel to unity with Christ and according to Paul should lead to 'being one in spirit and purpose' - a phrase that is similar to the start of verse 32 in Acts 4: "All the believers were one in heart and mind...'

When we become a Christian, we are reconciled with God and become part of his family. This means that other Christians become our brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as we are more likely to be open-handed to family members and care for them, so as Christians a natural outworking of the Gospel is to be open-handed and caring for other Christian members of our family.

The more we live out the gospel, the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, the more we will want to be open handed to others and especially other Christians.

Open Handed so that no-one is in need - vs. 34; Dt. 15

Flowing from this is the second reason to be open-handed. So that no-one in the church community will be in need. In Acts 4:34 it says that there was 'no-one in need' among them.

That is an amazing statement and as is made clear, it is because of the open handedness of the wealthier Christians. But it is also a fulfilment of a vision for the people of God going right back to Moses.

In Deuteronomy 15, Moses lays out a law that in Israel all debts should be cancelled every seven years. But he does not just put the law in place he sets out the vision, which is a response to God's blessing:

"However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you," (Deut. 15:4)

So, how is it possible that there will be no poor among them?

"If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother." (Deut. 15:7)

"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy in your land." (Deut. 15:10-11)

That is a great vision and one that to some extent has been met in our nation with the welfare state. Unlike the early church, in a world where most people were not far from starving, we live in a society that at least in theory tries to ensure everyone receives at least a basic income. It is a way of doing things that is rooted in our Christian culture and should be celebrated and encouraged.

So, given that the state provides a financial safety net of care, paid for from our taxes, how as a church should we be looking to provide care and support to one another. Perhaps particularly given the present pandemic, but also looking beyond.

The survey on care we carried out this week, provided some insights and ideas:

Practical Help

Despite the welfare state, there are still needs for some practical support. We've already mentioned the Food Bank and Thanet Winter Shelter that help to plug some of the holes in the net that is the welfare state. We could also mention initiatives like the Food Club operating out of St. George's hall.

But other personal support and practical help was mentioned:

Helping with essential trips.

Doing some laundry for another church member

Doing basic shopping

Staying with someone living by themselves while they recover from an operation

Loneliness and Isolation:

However most of the needs mentioned were not so much material or practical as relational. Loneliness and isolation, particularly during the Pandemic has become a big issue, but the church family has been a big help:

Knowing my church family are always there

Knowing that I am still a member of the church family

Been able to seek prayer and keeping in touch online is helpful because you feel less isolated.

A listening ear when I have needed it which always lifts my spirits.

Contact through phone calls, emails, text messages etc

I know that there is always a friend or someone who will listen to my worries or woes if I call them.

Post-Covid:

When it came to how we should look to care for one another post-covid, this need for personal contact, that has been so restricted by the Pandemic came to the fore:

We should work at ways of getting to know about each other and more natural interactions which focus on God's work for His praise and Glory.

Making sure we never take for granted the need for company, hugs, conversation, prayer.

Make a point of seeing others in person. That's what I've missed most of all

Indeed, there is a growing realisation that it is only by taking more seriously our relationships within the church that we can be aware of the needs that each person has:

This period has highlighted the importance of face to face contact and also taking time to listen. Moving forward we need to give time and listen more.

Face to face contact reveals how a person is coping through body language .

We need to do more together. People need to engage better rather than staying on the periphery.

Awareness and action. We should all be more aware of other people's needs and do something positive to assist.

As a church our aim should be to have no needy person amongst us. That will mean offering practical and material support. But firstly and perhaps even more importantly, we need to build natural caring relationships, that ensure people do not feel isolated and so we are in the best position to discern one another's needs. That takes time, energy and hospitality. It requires us to be openhanded.

Open Handed is a witness to the world - vs. 33, John 13:34-35

Finally, to be open handed is a witness to the world. We have already seen that in this passage there is a strong connection with the gospel. In the gospel, God is open handed to us, so we should be openhanded to one another.

But, in a sense it also works the other way. When people see that the community in which this gospel is preached is truly caring, where there is a truly open handed attitude towards one another, then this will provide a concrete outworking of the reality of the truth of the gospel. It will make it easier for people to believe the gospel.

It is interesting that before our passage, in verse 29, the church had prayed to be able to speak the gospel boldly. That is said to happen in verse 33, but it happens in the context of a church that is deeply caring for one another.

As Christians today we often complain that the world has shut its ears to the good news that we profess. Perhaps rather than hoping the world will its open its ears, we need first to open our eyes to see the God we pray to and open our hands to offer care to the other Christians around us.

After all Jesus said,

""A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.""