

2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 19, a.D. 2009

Acts 4: 32 – 35

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah

Our blessed Lord Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and lives. The love that came from the heavenly father to send his beloved Son into the world, and to the cross for us sinful men, is also the same love that was too strong for the grave, and burst through, destroying the stranglehold that death had on us.

The love of the risen Christ is active and strong in the congregation of believers that gathered in Jerusalem. This church began after Peter preached and those whom God gave ears to hear, believed and were baptized. 3,000 freshly washed converts on the Day of Pentecost.

The book of the Acts of the Apostles gives us a clear picture of that first congregation. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' doctrine, to one another, to daily worship, which always included the Lord's Supper and to sharing their meals at home with one another. The apostolic preaching was supported by apostolic miracles such as healing the sick and raising the dead. Everyone was in awe.

The love of Christ that flowed in that congregation was truly something to behold. It was also witnessed by the care and compassion that believers showed one another. No one was in need. The church took care of everyone's needs. We need to clarify again what those needs were; for example, daily bread, medicine for the sick, houses and clothes for the poor. There is no mention of games, toys, HD TV, or a cottage on the lake as being absolutely necessary to live in Christ.

Members of that congregation of their own free-will, sold everything they owned and brought the money to the apostles who then in turn provided for everyone's needs. No one claimed to own anything privately. Everyone was treated the same as God had loved them all the same in sending his son and raising him from the dead for us all.

Does that sound too good to be true? That may depend on how blessed you are. If God has not blessed you with abundant wealth, life in that congregation may sound like a great thing. If you have been blessed, then selling all your possessions and cashing in all your RRSPs, stocks, bonds and GICs, may sound more like a far out cult to you.

Remember that these early Christians were not forced or brainwashed to do any of these things. They were all one in heart and mind. This unity came from God who gave them the same ears to hear his words and the same mouth to say back to God what He told them. This is far deeper than simply feeling close to one another. It begins by agreeing with God that we have broken his commandments and truly deserve to die, but in grace, he sent us his Son who lived, died and rose for us that we may be re-made in his image, beginning in holy baptism.

To some people that sounds old-fashioned. The deceiving world and Satan's lies clamour for churches that give people what they want instead of what Jesus has so graciously given. Christ gave to his apostles the office of the keys. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven, if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. That's it. Upon the rock of Christ's forgiveness, the church is built and there is no other God that comes to be with his church. No fancy programmes, no smooth organizational seminars or business techniques that promise a great harvest in growing the church as if it were all what we do instead of Christ.

The word of God is Christ who showed what kind of husband he is for the church by dying for her. There was nothing pleasant about his death. It didn't make him feel good to do that. But he did it because the father asked him to do it in love. He lives now in the midst of his congregation and prays for his faithful and orders all things for the sake of his beloved church.

Everything wasn't perfect in that first congregation in Jerusalem, after all a Christian is a forgiven sinner, but there was a couple that willingly, intentionally lied about selling everything they had and kept some for themselves. Remember no one forced them to sell anything. God's love was working through his word among them.

Ananias and Sapphira held some of the money back for themselves after publicly saying they gave everything to the church. Such willful lying expels the Holy Spirit of God, for a child of God cannot have two masters. It is either God or anything else such as money or the love of man's praise. But we see the love of God working in that congregation in that Peter withdrew the forgiveness of sins for these two hardened, impenitent members of the congregation. He said that Satan filled their hearts and that they didn't lie to men but to God. First the husband fell over dead and then his

unbelieving wife. God cannot be mocked. The people were in awe as the ushers took away two dead bodies.

Satan continues to work first and foremost in the middle of the church even today. Many forget that church is a time to be with the risen Lord to receive forgiveness from him. Instead sadly, many leave and join a church that offers more what they want instead of what God wants to give, his life-saving gospel and blessed sacraments.

The Risen Jesus never commands you to liquidate all your assets and place the check in the offering plate, unless of course, you love money more than Him. It is harder for a rich man to get into heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle, because it's easier for the rich to forget that we are all beggars before God. We live by his grace.

We love because God loved us first. We are free to give because Christ gave his life freely for us and was raised again to give us a firm hope in the hour of our death that because he lives so shall we. We are rich because Christ made himself poor for you. Through his poverty in life and death, he has made you rich. There is no other incentive for all true and genuine Christian generosity. Amen