

Year B

Acts 4:32-37

Unlike me, some of you will be old enough to remember the summer of 1968. It's a wee while ago now, almost fifty years in fact. If you can remember back that far, then you may remember a song that topped the charts that summer, a song written by Gene Raskin and sung by Mary Hopkin, *Those were the days*. Do you remember it? Don't worry, I'm not going to sing it! But remember the chorus....

Those were the days my friend

We thought they'd never end
We'd sing and dance forever and a day
We'd live the life we choose
We'd fight and never lose
For we were young and sure to have our
way.¹

‘Those were the days’; how often do we say that? We look back and we will see those days, whenever they were, through rose-tinted spectacles. This passage in Acts of the Apostles has that kind of rose-tinted glow all around it, doesn’t it? It’s like that through every generation. Even for those of you who remember the great years of the 1950s in the Kirk. The old-timers back then would have

¹ http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/m/mary_hopkin/those_were_the_days.html

been waxing lyrical about the years before the War! So when we're looking at a passage like this in Acts of the Apostles we've got to be careful that we don't place it on a pedestal and admire it as a kind of exhibit. This is not about idealised Christianity for that would make it absolutely useless and it would set it against the rest of the New Testament witness which is absolutely grounded in the reality of the daily struggle to witness faithfully. 'Those were the days my friend'; absolutely, but we live now and what can we learn for now?

The Nicene Creed is an important early summation of Christian belief. We recite it together every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion and that is good because it unites us with Christians the world over and through the generations. Remember the succinct and significant statement in the Nicene Creed regarding the church? “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.”²

I would like to draw out significant teaching from the passage in Acts of the Apostles

² <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/nicene.htm>

today using these words from the Nicene Creed to help us.

Firstly, we believe in one Church. We are told that the Christians were of one heart and soul. That unity was expressed in their care of one another and in their boldness, testifying to the resurrection of Jesus. Their unity was not a theoretical concept. It was a practical, visible unity. The modern Church has much to learn in this respect. We all understand the importance of unity. Jesus' desire expressed in John's Gospel was that we would be one as he is one with his Father. The importance of unity is not up for

negotiation but how it is achieved clearly is because the Church through the ages has failed to find it. So often, the Church has reached for unity through its ecumenical councils and meetings. We have sat down together to debate our differences with the hope that there might be a way through the theological stalemate. There may have been some successes but they have been fleeting and people have tended to become more tired and disillusioned through the process. There must be another way and here we have it presented in this short passage of Scripture. Organisational unity was not the

objective for these first Christians, instead their unity was expressed through sharing and witnessing. We know who they are and they knew one another through what they did.

Secondly, we believe in one catholic Church. 'Catholic' has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic Church. It refers to the worldwide nature of the believing community. Note the individual who brought the proceeds of the sale of the field was identified by Luke as being a Levite from Cyprus. Luke is not simply filling out the biographical information for the reader's interest. He is

making the point that this new movement, Christianity, is not another localised expression of Judaism, but is a faith which will reach the world. There were only a few thousand believers but already there was an international mix which must be a distinguishing mark of the Christian Church; the Church catholic.

Thirdly, we believe in one, *holy*, catholic Church. Holiness refers to what is set aside as being uniquely of and for God. God demands holiness because it is reflective of his being. Holiness was demonstrated in the

early Church by the open sharing of God's gifts.

The modern way is to spend, spend, spend, to the very limits of our income and then some more!

A few hundred years ago the great preacher and evangelist John Wesley showed us another way. Wesley lived in economically uncertain times, yet from humble beginnings he became so well known that his income eventually reached 1400 pounds per year. A big sum of money in those days.

So what did he do with all this wealth? Did he tithe it? No. Wesley went way beyond

tithing. He disciplined himself to live on just 30 pounds of the 1400 pounds he earned every year. He gave away 98% of all he earned and lived on just 2%!

Wesley once preached a sermon on Luke 16.9. In it he spelled out his philosophy: money is a tool that can be used for great good or great ill. “It is an excellent gift of God” he claimed, “answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked: It gives to the traveller and the stranger where to lay his head. By it we may supply the place of an husband to the

widow, and of a father to the fatherless. We may be a defence for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick, of ease to them that are in pain; it may be as eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death! It is therefore of the highest concern that all who fear God know how to employ this valuable talent; that they be instructed how it may answer these glorious ends, and in the highest degree.”

He went on to spell out three simple rules which can guide us: gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.

Wesley lived out these principles, on another occasion remarking: , “If I leave behind me ten pounds...you and all mankind [can] bear witness against me, that I have lived and died a thief and a robber.”³

These are marks of holiness in marked contrast to the capitalism which looks to the bottom line. The problem with wealth is a spiritual one. Money is not the root of all evil it is what we do with it that matters.

Finally, we believe in one holy catholic and *apostolic* Church. This may seem to us to be

³ Christian History Newsletter, November 30, 2001. Wesley's sermon on Luke 16.9 can be accessed at <http://gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/serm-050.stm>

the least significant of the Church characteristics. But not for the early Christians. Everything was brought to the apostles' feet. This was, you see, the place of authority, not because the apostles were anything special in themselves but because the apostles as witnesses to the resurrected Christ were representative of him. The apostles take us back to the resurrection which is the heart of the Christian message and defines the significance of the Church. We are apostolic because Jesus is risen from the dead. We do not have a gospel without

the witness of the apostles who saw him and have led us to believe in him.

“Those were the days my friend!” These are the days now when we can dare to live the way the early Christians did. It was radical and incisive. It was needed to propel the Church out into its mission and today we need to find even a little of their Spirit for our age. May God inspire us as we seek to follow. Amen.