

10May26 from SUFFERING to COMMUNITY sermon

Most of us will recognise a simple pattern in how groups take shape. When people first come together, there is a kind of forming — polite, careful, not quite sure where we stand. Then comes the storming — differences emerge, tensions surface, things feel less settled. If people stay, something begins to take shape — norms form, trust grows, ways of living together become clearer. And from there, a group can begin to act together with purpose. It can carry weight. It can perform. And then, often, something happens — pressure, change, loss — and the whole thing has to reform again.

We are now far enough into the Easter season to recognise a similar pattern in the life of following Christ. From resurrection flows hope. From hope flows holiness. From holiness flows witness. And last week we faced the point where witness meets resistance. From witness flows suffering. And now we arrive at the next step. From suffering flows community. That may not be what we expect. We tend to think of suffering as something that isolates, something that pushes people apart. And sometimes it does. But just as often, the opposite happens. People find one another. They discover they cannot carry things on their own. They begin to share what they would otherwise keep hidden. And slowly, something forms between them.

You can see that movement if you follow one person through it. Last week we saw him only briefly — Paul, standing at the edge of the crowd as Stephen is killed, holding the cloaks while the stones are thrown. He is not the one speaking. He is not the one under pressure. He is part of the pressure. And then everything turns. The same man begins to hunt down the followers of Jesus. He enters their houses, drags them out, has them arrested. He is determined to shut this movement down before it spreads any further. Until, on the road to Damascus, he is stopped — not by an argument, not by a better idea, but by Christ himself. The one he thought he was opposing speaks to him, calls him by name, and turns him around. From that point on, his life takes a different direction. The one who caused suffering begins to carry it. The one who tried to silence this message becomes the one who cannot stop speaking it. And the suffering comes. He is driven out of synagogues, lowered over city walls in baskets, beaten, imprisoned, mocked, misunderstood, and left alone. But notice what happens in those places. He is never left alone for long. People gather around him. They pray with him. They shelter him. They learn from him. Communities form not in spite of the suffering, but in the middle of it. His hardships become the very places where the church takes shape.

And that is why we find him in Athens. He is not there by accident. He is there because the communities that formed around him through suffering have now sent him there. He stands there in a place where he does not belong, among people who do not share his story, in a city full of other gods, other ways of seeing the world. It is new ground, and not especially welcoming ground. And he arrives there as someone who has already learned something through suffering. Not just how to endure it, but what it does to people. He has seen, again and again, that pressure does not only scatter — it can draw people together. He has seen strangers become companions, listeners become sharers, gatherings become communities. So he stands there believing that this can happen here as well. Not because the conditions are right, but because he has seen what suffering can do when people do not walk away from one another.

And Peter then speaks into that same reality. He writes to a community that is already living under strain, and what he describes is not dramatic, but it is demanding. He does not say, “Try harder.” He says, “Tend the flock.” He does not say, “Take charge.” He says, “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” He does not say, “Do it because you must.” He says, “Do it

willingly, as God would have you do it.” He does not say, “Use your position.” He says, “Be an example to the flock.” He does not say, “Stand over them.” He says, “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another.” In 1 Peter 5 the whole movement is away from pressure and performance and toward the steady, shared work of caring for one another — the kind of leadership that holds a community together rather than holding it down. These are the practices that allow people to stay together when things are difficult. Because suffering changes the terms. It strips away pretence. It exposes what is real. It shows us where we need one another. And if people stay — if they do not withdraw or harden — it begins to bind them together.

I think this is how we can understand what Jesus was saying in the Gospel reading. He was speaking to his disciples on that last night. He tells them that he is going away, and that they will not be able to rely on his physical presence in the way they have done. They are about to face confusion, fear, and pressure that could easily pull them apart. And at that point he does not tell them to hold it together by their own strength. He tells them that the Advocate will be given to them. In John 14 Jesus spoke to his disciples together, even though English only gives us the single word “you” where other languages distinguish between singular and plural. I will show you what I mean. Now — tap yourself on the chest as I read these promises: “The Spirit of truth will be with you... I will not leave you orphaned... you will see me... you will know... I will come to you.” Stop it! Stop tapping. Jesus never made any such promise! Remember, English only gives us the single word “you” where other languages such as the Greek this was written in, have little you and big you. So, now try this instead: look around the room, smiling and waving at as many people as you can while I read the promises. “The Spirit of truth will be with you... Jesus will not leave you orphaned... you will see Jesus... you will know him... he will come to you.” Now that is what Jesus was promising.

So this is the threshold we cross this week. From suffering flows community. Not automatically. Not without cost. But as something that takes shape when people choose to remain with one another through difficulty. And the question is very close to the ground. Where have you already known this to be true? Where has difficulty drawn you closer to others, rather than pushing you away? And where, right now, are you being invited not to withdraw, but to remain — to be part of something that is still forming, even if it feels uncertain, even if it is still in the storming stage?

The kinds of communities that Paul laboured to form and that Peter was shepherding do not appear fully formed. They grow when people choose to stay with one another through difficulty. When they lead by example rather than control. When they accept guidance rather than resist it. When they clothe themselves with humility. Because in the end, community is not something we build from strength. It is something that grows in the places where we discover we need one another. And that is where God meets us.

From suffering flows community. And the life that began at Easter continues to take shape among us.

Let us pray.

Trinity of love, as your people you call us to live close to you: guide us by your Spirit of truth wherever we go — in busy places and quiet ones, in easy times and hard ones; so that through us your love may reach the hearts of people everywhere, through Jesus Christ our brother. Amen.