

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Some of us might hear Jesus’ words and find them to be an inspiring vision, others of us might need more concrete guidance and are left wondering “what comes next? What are we supposed to do now?” “What does it mean to have life and have life abundantly” Clearly this is not about dying and going to heaven to sit on a cloud and play the harp; that might be a good vision when we are contemplating death but it doesn’t say anything about what to do in our lives in the here and now.

Luke starts to answer this question in our reading from Acts.

The first followers spent time together. They immersed themselves in the apostles’ teaching. They prayed together in the temple and at home and ate together. Their fellowship was contagious and they attracted many followers. Their understanding of the kingdom of God was such that they gave up personal ownership they held all things in common. While some of this may see this a socialist vision, God’s intention for human kind was that we were to live in peace, that none were to be in need, that the sick, the widowed, and the orphaned were to be cared for. The vulnerable were to be made safe - which clearly requires investment on the part of those who are less vulnerable. Furthermore real equity is when everyone has access to what is needed without having to beg for it not ...when one group is in power and bestows the necessities on those in want. Power and control therefore are not vested in the few to be doled out according to whim but shared. The collective lifestyle of Luke’s portrait is typical of the vision for utopian societies; it requires a common vision and a willingness to work collectively through the challenges of developing processes and procedures that are understood, accepted and followed by the group. Issues of power and control, responsibility, and accountability have to be delineated. All of these can be less formal in a small group where relationships are strong but Christian communities grew rapidly. Processes for incorporating people into this new and radical lifestyle had to be developed. Cultural issues had to be addressed because the newly baptized were not just Jews but gentiles as well. Lue’s community is one way of living life abundantly but if you eyes’ started to roll and you found yourself hoping for a simpler life, you are out of luck.

Communal living is hard work. It requires negotiation skills, emotional intelligence, and patience for the interminable group meetings trying to build consensus around critical decisions for the group, decisions that have tactical and strategic implications. It was a lot easier when Jesus said “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” The vision become a touchstone for those trying to live into it and to spread the word.

Luke's description of the early disciples' common life is probably an exaggeration but it is the next level down in operationalizing the vision that Jesus offered to his followers. Nor is this kind of life without the fruits of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal 5:22-23 NRS)

I also imagine that as you listened to the requirements, skills, and attributes for building such a community you might have reflected on how different it is from the church community you know today. Almost immediately the "church" had to evolve in order to live into the society in which it existed. It's one thing to try to live in isolation from the surrounding culture but it is something else again when its realities and demands threaten to disrupt its organizing principles. We see an example of the in our reading from 1st Peter.

"It is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly." Such words are liable to raise the hackles on anyone's neck. Such words have been used to make people stay in situations that are not safe, to suffer needlessly when oppressed by others. This is made more difficult by comparing this to the suffering of Christ. "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly." Talk about a guilt trip! First we need to remember that Christ did not die for no reason, he did all that he could to rile the establishment both Jewish and Roman as part of his mission. His crucifixion and death had purpose in God's plan of salvation.

This is where context for any biblical passage is important. The author is not talking about suffering in an ordinary context, i.e. abusive relationships in families or in the work place, he is addressing the circumstances of specific followers of Christ: slaves and wives whose decision to follow Christ was potentially subversive and may have put them in a difficult spot.

Our lectionary does not include verse that precedes our reading, probably to reduce potential controversy. The author's words are startling and offend our modern conscience. "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." (1Pe 2:18 NRS) Christianity attracted followers from all orders of society from wealthy matrons, soldiers like Cornelius, and slaves. The author is speaking to those who are suffering because of their faith, not necessarily because they happen to be slaves. He is asking them to model good Christian behavior. Much to our collective shame this passage was one of those used to justify slavery before the Civil War by slaveholders, the very same who often refused their slaves access to reading and writing, conversion to Christianity, and the opportunity to practice their faith. In the passage which follows today's reading the author goes on to address wives who have become followers of Christ but whose husbands have not. "Wives, in the same way, accept the authority of your husbands, so that, even if some of them do not obey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives' conduct," when they see the purity and

reverence of your lives.” (1Pe 3:1-2 NRS) Again, they are to model behavior that reflects the life of Christ.

These admonitions by the author of 1 Peter may not resonate with us today but they do reflect the attempts by the followers of Christ to come to terms with trying to live in the culture and circumstances in which they found themselves and to provide an opportunity for all who wished to be saved to follow the shepherd. What we can take from this today is the intention of the verse “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. Christian resistance to injustice is not found in retaliation or the use of force but in demonstrating perseverance and fortitude in the face of injustice.

We have seen how the vision articulated by Jesus evolved into the community described by Luke, and evolved to adjust to the realities of life by the author of 1st Peter. It’s important that we hold onto this vision as we make changes in how we understand scripture, how we organize our common lives, and how we worship, this way we can stay on track

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” So yes he did. Jesus came so that we might have life and have it abundantly. Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and assumption bring to fruition the confidence reverberating in the 23rd Psalm, a psalm that has brought comfort to people for more than 2,000 years. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures... He revives my soul,... Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; ...you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Amen.