

Second Sunday of Easter

Fr Jonathan Jong

Acts 4.32-35

1 John 5.1-6

John 20.19-31

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. [...] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.

— The Acts of the Apostles, the fourth chapter.

+In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

About 15,000 years ago, we—by which I mean, humans—began transitioning from hunting-and-gathering to agriculture. Most of the action happened in what we now call the “Middle East”, and more specifically in the stretch between modern Egypt and Iran, just above the Arabian Peninsula. Wild pigs were first domesticated there, followed by mouflon, the ancestors of modern sheep, about 2,000 years later, roughly 10,000 years before Jesus was born, not far away. Just a little later, his ancestors began planting and selectively breeding edible grain: wheat and barley, peas and lentils, that sort of thing. This first agricultural revolution changed the world completely, providing the basis for the large-scale societies that we have today.

There have since been many, smaller but still significant, leaps in the way we produce food. Even now, innovations in breeding, fertilisers, irrigation, crop rotation, and mechanisation are increasing agricultural productivity all around the world. In fact, we produce more than one-and-a-half times enough

food to feed everyone on this planet, enough to feed 10 billion people. And yet, about 800 million people are chronically hungry, through no fault of their own.

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There was not a needy person among them. Not because they discovered how to fix nitrogen or grow high yielding cultivars. Not because they could multiply loaves and fish by fiat, without the scientific miracles of a post-apostolic age. Not even because their Protestant work ethic spurred them to pull themselves up by the thongs of their own sandals. But because *as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them and of the proceeds distribution was made to each as any had need.* Or, as it says in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, “From each according to their ability, to each according to their need”.

Maybe it's just me, but communism seems like an even greater miracle than resurrection.

But then, maybe that's the point. The miracle of the resurrection is not just that a man was dead and now he lives, but that the whole world is made new, just like it was when it was called out of nothing at all, but totally and unspeakably different too. Out of nothing, the world; out of us, the new creation, even these people, who would sell their headphones and fountain pens and even their books, so that a few fewer people have to go hungry or thirsty or cold. It is as impossible as resurrection; and in the afterglow of one impossible thing, another is called for, and the question for us is whether we are willing to be its vessel, the vectors of the new creation, this revolution without rival that rearranges the world in the image of one crucified and risen.

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Let's not kid ourselves. The Church of England bears less resemblance to this Palestinian base community than the risen Christ a gardener lurking around sepulchres. By this, I do not just mean that our

current use of 16,000 buildings and a £7.9 billion portfolio of investable assets would baffle our earliest predecessors, who didn't know what clergy pensions or restoration projects were. Nor am I suggesting that the Church should immediately divest and redistribute. The fact—if it is a fact—that early Christians regularly liquidated their assets for aggressive redistribution was surely a sign of love and generosity, but it was also probably made possible by a widespread belief that the end was nigh. This kind of selfless auto-dispossession is not uncommon in end-of-the-world cults. Short of our fears over nuclear proliferation and climate change, we do not now share the early Church's expectation that we are in the end times. Unlike them, we need our superannuation schemes.

All the same, it should be disturbing to us that communism is *so* unfashionable, so patently absurd and offensive to Christians today that the very mention of the idea immediately conjures the bogeymen of Stalinism, Maoism, and the dynastic

tyranny of North Korea. The New Testament is littered with commands and stories about the giving up of wealth for the sake of the poor, but we would rather forget Zaccheus and Barnabas and interpret away Jesus's refrain to the rich young man, repeated in Matthew and Mark and Luke. The rich young man at least had the decency to walk away sorrowful, but we have cleverly convinced ourselves that radical sacrifice is optional. It's a metaphor, we say, but we are not sure what for. It's a warning against undue attachment to our belongings, we say, clutching desperately to our investment ISAs. Things have changed, we say, but the poor are with us still and always, and no wonder.

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Make no mistake, Christian generosity is alive and well. You give up some portion of your income to the Church; almost certainly more than I do. And that's not counting the time you spend cleaning and decorating, making tea and spreadsheets. And that's

not counting what you do for Oxfam and the Gatehouse and the people who sleep rough in and around our parish.

I myself have been and continue to be the beneficiary of your kindness. On three continents, Christians have offered to feed and shelter me, have gifted me with warmth and whiskey, camaraderie and (on two recent occasions) clothes irons, generosities that have meant more to me than I know how to say, that have allowed me a glimpse of the glorious Body of the risen Christ, humanity in God's own image.

All of which is to say that our critical self-examination and lamentation over our manifold apathies and hypocrisies are, in the light of the resurrection, also occasions of Christ's redemptive presence, reminders—even if painful ones—of who we truly are, of what we are, by the grace of God, capable of accomplishing. To stare at the absence that is our failure, the nothingness that is our sin is to peer into the emptiness of the tomb, to feel the holes in his hands

and side, who picks us up and sends us forth and goes before us, to transform the world he loves.

It is a great mystery, that our offering to God of our sins and weaknesses should be to us a gift, the invitation to participate in the world's redemption.

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Out of nothing, everything; out of cowards, apostles; out of us, the people of the resurrection, the body of the risen Christ, broken and poured out for the sake of the world. This too is a mystery, that what was once bread and wine then, by the power of God, signifies nothing of this world, nothing less than the risen Christ himself, whose body and blood demand a decision, a response: if not betrayal and denial, then whispered Amen and Amen, with quivering hands outstretched to join those pierced that bend the arc of history towards justice and peace.

Make no mistake: our faith is the victory that conquers the world, which is to say that the world is ours to conquer if we want it. And if we forgive sins, they are forgiven, which is to say that the sins we retain are our responsibility too. And so it is that we can go away from here, fed, to feed one another and the world too; or we can, our bellies full of Christ, walk the hungry by. We can receive the signs of a world made new in us and through us; or we can turn the bread of life into just so many empty calories. We can look around and see this church, this world full of people to love, and feed and clothe and encourage and cherish; or we can obsess over the mess we have made of it all, and despair and surrender, despite the victory already won for us.

So God help us; God stretch out our hands and speak for our tongues the Amens beyond our telling; and therefore turn even our own empty nothings into a world worth saving.