

Abundance

Readings: Acts 2:42 – 47, John 10:1 - 10

This coming week R&N are coming to speak with us. Our church has four mission families that we pray for and support on a regular basis. They have been:

- Christine (and Allan who died recently)
- The Corin family in Central Asia – they will be coming to see us in July
- Fey and Murray Cotter in Albania – they came to see us a few weeks back
- And the Sussex family who have been in Phnom Pen. Phil was doing dentist work and Becky teaching. They came back home at the end of last year though.

Vestry and the Mission Action Group have decided we'd like N & R and family to be our next mission partners. They will be heading off to a part of Asia to enable girls, previously involved in sex trafficking, to provide for themselves and live normal lives.

When I heard what they are going to do, my heart leapt with excitement. This fantastic work will be very hard but very rewarding. It's lovely to be able to support them – both as a church and individually.

On ANZAC day I led the Brightwater service and attended the Richmond one where RSA Chaplain Rev.d Peter Bean was involved. I was struck again at the privilege we have as a church to be able to connect with society at times like this. Our abundant God is at work as more and more people attend ANZAC day services.

And more and more people are becoming concerned about justice issues – and the environment too. It's very cool that people in our community are very excited about projects like the one N & R will be involved in. I see God's abundance in this as well.

The issues provide ways for us to link with our community, to talk about our motivation for being involved and to share something of God's love.

You see any desire for justice actually comes from God. Because our abundant God's very nature is justice.

One verse among hundreds in the Bible is Deut 10:18

He (the Lord) ensures that orphans and widows receive justice. He shows love to the foreigners living among you and gives them food and clothing.

And the Lord expects justice from his people:

The Lord told the Israelites to "Appoint judges and officials for yourselves from each of your tribes in all the towns the Lord your God is giving you. They must judge the people fairly. You must never twist justice or show partiality. Never accept a bribe, for bribes blind the eyes of the wise and corrupt the decisions of the godly."

Listen to the next verse “Let true justice prevail, so you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” Deut 16:18 – 20

The Jewish people could not occupy their own land unless they lived out the justice found in the very character of God. They had to care for others as well as themselves. God commanded it.

Everything God has provided throughout history is concerned with justice, peace, reconciliation for all of creation.

Question:

In what areas of your life and/or community do you see God’s abundant provision?

Today Christians ought to be at the forefront of justice projects. And many are – TEARFUND, Christian World Service, La Rocha are just a few examples.

Some think that we should be focusing on soul-winning but the Gospel is holistic – it doesn’t deal with bits of us; bits of our lives. Our abundant God brings healing to the whole person; to the whole creation. Let’s look briefly at the Acts passage.

The believers were committed to teaching, fellowship, sharing meals as a sacramental act to prayer. All of that was centred around abundant relationship – relationship with the risen Christ who was found in their togetherness. Their togetherness gave them the ability to witness effectively and to work in the power of the Holy Spirit.

People were awe-struck at the many wonders and signs they did. We’d love more signs and wonders too. We need to be careful to look to the miracle-worker not to the miracles themselves though. They are not an end to themselves. Miracles always point to the al-powerful God and they are acts of justice. Whenever Jesus healed someone physically it meant they could participate fully in the life of the community. It brought about restoration and the abundant life that Jesus promised: I have come that they might have life and that life to the fullness.

Notice that the kind of life Jesus followers lived demanded massive commitment. Not everyone would have sold all their stuff by any means. However when someone was in need, someone else would sell something to provide for that need.

We all know some of the statistics regarding wealth in the Western world. 10% of kiwis own 60% of our country’s wealth according to Statistics NZ. Depending on your politics we think either the government should provide for those who struggle or they should somehow work themselves out of poverty. Often neither is possible.

I’m a huge fan of small micro-enterprise loans to help get people on their feet. We have a couple in Nelson – the Angel Fund and the Nelson Enterprise Trust. Check them out sometime – you might be able to help.

Back in the day they just sold stuff or took up a collection like Paul did for those in Jerusalem. It worked. 1 Cor 16:1, 2 Cor 9:1

So these Jesus followers had fellowship together every day. Maybe that doesn't literally mean that every single person was at every single meeting. But it does mean their relationship was important. It was important at least partly because it meant they knew what was happening on a day to day basis.

Don't you hate it when you hear that someone you care about has been struggling for a while? And you didn't know? So you haven't helped. Social isolation is becoming a huge justice issue in our community.

And the result of the early church's caring and sharing was that people came to know Christ every day. The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

I might be wrong but I don't reckon one of them worried about growing their church. Instead they simply got on with the business of being the church. I don't reckon they were constantly worried about what they didn't have but focused on the abundance that God provided and figured out creative ways to help the abundance flow.

When Jesus calls himself the gate for the sheep, he is talking about how he himself is the one who enables the church to be the church. He is the centre of the church; the friend and Saviour of the church. His is the voice we recognise.

Jesus points out that previous leaders have had very dodgy motives. Perhaps some church leaders still do. But Jesus says that when we orient ourselves around him, we have freedom – we can come in and out of the gate. We will find life in him; abundance in him.

And surely that is what we want for those we love and for those in our wider community – the abundance we ourselves have through Christ.

Question:

In what areas of your life and/or community could that abundant provision flow through you more to reach others also?

It's very easy for us to think about the early church "Well that was for then." It wasn't just for then. In many ways our culture is similar to theirs – many gods, many truths. The human condition is still the same – we all need to give and receive love. I don't believe the days of miracles are gone.

In the early church, the believers sold their possessions (at least some of them) to give to anyone in need! What is the Lord saying to us about their example?

Some years back some of Tony Campolo's students taught potential missionaries about living and transforming poor societies. His students began a research project looking at

how a small group of Christians could bring about social justice reforms in a small country. They chose the Dominican Republic.

They got very excited. One day someone asked "If this project is so good, why don't we just do it? Why don't we change the Dominican Republic?"

Tony reports being blown away. But the student was right. If it was so good, why not do it?

So they bought shares in the no-longer existent Gulf and Western which dominated the Republic's economy at the time. The company owned hotels, a resort and other real estate. They were also the major sugar producer at that time.

They each brought one share in the company. Now, they could go to the Shareholder' meeting. There they took turns reading from Scripture and calling the company to responsibility. Specifically they were called to address the low wages of the sugar workers because the company had made the country into a single-crop economy.

They expected to be jeered at. Then they'd go to the next stage - direct confrontation.

They were gob-smacked when the company executives were very willing to listen. Discussions were held with various stakeholders over the next few months.

Then came a phone call from the Vice President in charge of communications. He would be announcing Gulf and Western's commitment to help the Dominican Republicans. That commitment included creating health services, using some of the land for food production rather than just sugar, and developing various education programs including a new university for teachers, lawyers, nurses and engineers.

The company followed through on their promises, spending half a billion dollars on the Eastern side of the republic over the next five years. The lives of local people were radically changed.

That's a true story; a real life example of God's abundant resources being redistributed so that not just Westerners could live a decent lifestyle. The Gospel of Christ was evident throughout the process. Tony's students began something they imagined and the Spirit of God did far more abundantly than they hoped for.

I want to leave you with one last question:

How might our own fellowship/friendship with each other be genuine, frequent and flow outwards so that we enjoy the favour of all the people and the Lord brings more and more people to him?