

## Study 4

# A Sense of Community



Ford Madox Brown, Jesus washing Peter's feet, 1852-6

## Key verses:

<sup>44</sup> All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Luke, who is our guide to the early church, knew there was something positive happening among the new believers, a developing sense of what 'community' really meant. This was not unique, but different.

The Dead Sea Scrolls tell us something about the Jewish Sect of Essenes (with around 4000 members), where the community living in the desert lived without private property and shared everything in common. Greek sects such as the Pythagoreans rejected private property.

What Luke tells us is that these early Christians shared what they had with the community, and if necessary, would sell property to meet a need, going much further than was the norm in and around Jerusalem.

There is also a possibility that although major persecution of Christians was still to happen, they might soon see sanctions appear, and this drawing together in communal life might be an early response to these pressures. History informs us that persecution of minority groups is not uncommon.

## Group discussion:

Q) Have you experience of your local community, in and outside of church, working together to meet a particular need?

Q) Should the church be actively looking to meet needs within the local area in which it is based, and if local resources are poor, in what other ways might it help?

## A true fellowship

*Read John 17:20-23, 1 John 1:3-7*

Told by Jesus that he would shortly be 'leaving the world and going back to the Father', the disciples struggled to understand what the implications would be for them, as Jesus obviously had plans for them. He prays for his disciples, but also for everyone who will believe the truth and life that they will shortly be sharing.

Jesus knows that at this moment, the disciples are both confused and weak, but this is temporary. He prays for the unity of all believers, bound by the love of God, which will be their testimony to the world of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

And that was the miracle, post-Pentecost, that convinced so many that the message in the disciples' words and lives was from

God and would influence the way of life and fellowship in the early church.

In his letter to a struggling group of believers in 1 John, the author insists that the apostles only shared what they had seen and heard as they followed Jesus, so that everyone might enjoy the fellowship they experience, 'with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ'.

The word used for 'fellowship' (koinonia) is common in the New Testament but difficult to translate fully, referring as it does to the supernatural life that Christians share. And it is this 'fellowship with us', he says, that is the signature life of the whole fellowship of believers as they live in the light and knowledge of God.

### Group discussion:

Q) Could the disciples have carried on the work they did without their Pentecost experience, and do we give enough thought to the Holy Spirit in our daily lives?

Q) What conclusion do you hope visitors might take away with them after joining you for worship?

Q) How would you describe Christian fellowship to someone who asks?

## Caring for one another

*Read Deuteronomy 15:7-8, Matthew 25:34-40*

In Deuteronomy chapter 15, Moses talks of a day for cancelling all debts, at the end of every seven years. But in the same chapter, we find him saying that you really don't have to wait for a particular year to show generosity or mercy to a fellow Israelite in their time of need, as it should be a natural response. Moses tells them not to be tight-

fisted, but open-handed, and God would bless their compassion and generosity.

Matthew shared many of Jesus's sayings and parables, in this chapter mostly about the end times and his coming again in glory. He talks of sheep and goats, a time of judgement. But the message is for the

present time and the future, concerning the way of life of those who count themselves part of his flock. Jesus talks of 'the nations' rather than the more 'one nation' message of Moses, and the inference may be that our attitude to the needs of the world, rather than just the fellowship, reflects the way we serve God. That the people in the story seem unclear when they have done the right thing suggests it may simply have been their natural response, who they are.

### Group discussion:

Q) Is there a balance to be had between financial generosity and having 'enough' in our lives, and where do we draw a line?

Q) Moses wanted an 'open-handed' rather than 'tight-fisted' approach to life. What do you think he meant by that?

## Love at the heart of life

*Read Luke 10:25-29, 1 John 3:17, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7*

Questioned by an expert in the law about how to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks for the expert's summary, which comes back as loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbour as you would yourself. But that begs the question 'who do we call our neighbour?', and the remaining discourse is the well-known story of the Good Samaritan who, rather than the priest and Levite who walked past, stopped at the side of the road to ask the man lying there if he needed help, probably tore his own clothes to make bandages, used his oil to clean the wounds, took him to an inn and paid for his care, promising more if needed.

This was the good neighbour, the man whose natural response was a sacrificial offering of love. And that, says Jesus, is the answer to your question.

The message from 1 John is blunt and to the point, as the author provides a practical 'test' of faith. It states that if God's love is indeed in our hearts, then it reveals itself in our willingness to show both generosity and compassion in our daily lives wherever we see a 'brother or sister' in need. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, emphasises the importance of love being at the heart of a believer's faith and life, and by inference, that of the whole fellowship.



Van Gogh, *The Good Samaritan*, 1890

### Group discussion:

Q) Who do you think of as your 'neighbour' and why?

Q) What is your natural reaction to the beggar that you approach along the shopping street, and what is the first thought that comes to mind?

Q) Our opening verse talks of the fellowship having 'everything in common'. Can this extend beyond the monetary and physical, and in what way?

## Pause for thought

Spend a few minutes this week just thinking and praying for all those whose income is so small that they are forced to borrow, often at high interest rates, and face spiralling debt problems. Remember organisations such as Christians Against Poverty (CAP) who help people who find themselves in situations such as this.

## A Prayer

Lord God, help us to love those  
whom we find it difficult to love.  
Give us a heart that reaches out  
to those we would otherwise ignore.  
Give us the strength not to cross  
on the other side of the road,  
but to play the part of the Samaritan.  
This will not be easy, Lord.  
It is not in our nature.  
We spread our love thinly  
among those we can relate to,  
those who share our values,  
and those who do not threaten  
our comfortable lifestyle.

It's not easy, Lord,  
and on our own we shall fail.  
But with your help all things are possible.  
You led the way,  
and it is your example that we look to.  
You turned the values of this world upside  
down.  
Do the same with us, Lord.  
Help us live the reality of your Love.  
Amen