

Reflection for Sunday 11 April

It's sometimes claimed that as we get older our brains allow negative memories to fade over time. We tend, by and large, to have a rather rosy view of the past. Or is it just that as we get older, we learn to put our more negative experiences into perspective? I for one, think I'd go crazy if I'd managed to cling onto a lifetime's memory of every bad experience I've suffered, and I quite sure I'm not alone.

Some (very wise) biblical commentators suggest that the writer of the Acts of Apostles, quite probably Luke, also looked back with rose tinted spectacles on the life of Jesus's friends as they came together to form a new community in the days following his resurrection. But Luke is also honest enough to follow up and contrast the ideal laid before us in today's reading with some much darker stories about the life of the earliest church. The first Christians were not always as generous or as open as these first few verses suggest.

This reassures us that we don't have to try to imitate exactly the life of the earliest church, any more than when some of us wish we could put the clock back - as we look wistfully back to those days when all the pews in our now half-empty churches were full and everyone went to Sunday School. There's simply no point beating ourselves up and wondering where we went wrong, or in imagining that there's a magical key to unlocking a past, that if we're brutally honest, wasn't ever quite as rosy as we'd like to think.

What we can do with integrity is to recognise that just as the experience of the living presence of the risen Jesus resurrection really did transform the lives of the first disciples, it still has the power to transform our lives too. But how we order our life together today always requires fresh thought, prayer and courage.

One leading commentator, J D G Dunn, likens Luke's description of the early church to Monet's famous studies of water lilies, which were repeated attempts by the artist to express an impression of the fleeting and ever-changing beauty of the flowers in his garden at Giverny. It's thought that he painted them in oils around 250 times. No one picture could ever say it all, but every single picture that he left has the power to stir our imagination and enables us to see the world differently.

We can learn a lot from such lessons of how impressionist paintings like those by Monet can set our imaginations free. The novelist and poet Deborah Levy, writing in a blog for the Royal Academy website suggests, for example, that we are human clay 'onto which impressions of our world are pressed.' She points out that the word 'impression' has its roots in the Latin word that means to press upon or stamp.

People, places, situations are stamped upon our mind and help to form who we are – we form an impression of a new person or place in just a few seconds.

In just the same way, the experience of being aware that Jesus was alive and with them in a new and wonderfully liberating way, seems almost immediately to have changed and convinced his friends in a manner they could never hope to explain adequately.

They now saw and experienced the world in a fresh way too, one that was full of hope and endless possibilities. They were impressed and changed. Nothing could ever be the same again.

Luke's picture of what some have described as a kind of communist experiment was a first response. Though it doesn't present us with a clear manifesto or model for what the church should be like now, it also serves to help awaken our imagination. It too is an impressionist work of art that invites us to respond to our living Lord in ways appropriate to our time and place.

Although the experience of the presence of the risen Christ still has the power to change us and to enable us to see the world differently, we need to make our own art, founded on the overwhelming outpouring of love and gratitude that we feel when we hear the story of Jesus's resurrection and let it flood into our lives.

'What can we do?' is then neither a cautious hedging of our bets lest we get hurt and our plans all go wrong, nor a desperate attempt to reconstruct our distorted ideas of the past, but a conviction that we really can do something new and life-changing. It echoes yet again Isaiah's prophetic hope that I quoted last week: *I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it.*

Let's be blunt. The church has had a rough time in this country and region. We've experienced decline not growth. Our talk about transformation and growth can sometimes seem more like an attempt to cling onto the past than to trust that the risen Lord Jesus can stir our imaginations and hope and take us to places beyond the narrow confines of our imagining.

So then, let's throw away those rosy spectacles and allow the love that so impressed the early church to transform our life together today. We may find that we're challenged to leave behind the possessions that symbolise our traditions and fixed ideas of what a church should be like, but if we're to put our trust in our risen Lord, what else can we do?