

My Cup Overflows

Acts 2:42-7

Ps 23

Probably the greatest problem faced by many western churches, the greatest obstacle to Christian ethical righteousness, the main reason why we do not live out the gospel as we might, the greatest problem faced by many western churches, is carpeting ... that's carpeting! It will take a few minutes to explain why:

The world is facing a crisis, one that has long been foretold by environmentalists. Rice is the staple diet for half of the people on our planet. In the last year the cost of rice has increased by 70 percent, and is due to rise still further. Other food crops have hit historically high prices in the last year: the cost of corn has increased by 31 percent, the cost of soya 87 percent, and the cost of wheat 130 percent! This is a crisis, but why is it happening now?

Various factors have contributed. Because it is more profitable, the rise of biofuels has increased enormously in the last year or two, causing a massive reduction in the amount of food being produced. The growing middle classes of Eastern Asia are also demanding more meat and dairy products, taking more land that was previously used for producing staple foods. And then flooding and poor weather conditions have taken their toll. It is hardly surprising that there have been food riots in Haiti and in the Philipines.

The crisis has hit the point where today, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund has issued some stark warnings. He said that hundreds of thousands of people will be starving. And that it is not only a humanitarian crisis, because it will lead to trade imbalances that affect the entire globe.

That is the state of the world as we gather for worship this morning. And in the psalm we read of a worshipper in difficult circumstances, who knows what it is to be in want, who walks through the valley of the shadow of death. A psalmist who somehow sees God's provision in the midst of this. Who looks to a God who prepares a lavish meal table, and who fills a cup to overflowing.

There are various obstacles in our lifestyle that prevent us from grasping that phrase. The main one being carpets!... The idea of a cup overflowing is accompanied by the image of being on all fours, scrubbing and mopping and cleaning up! When my kids helpfully pour themselves a drink in the kitchen, their cup very often overflows. They know how to be generous with resources. Thankfully, the kitchen has a vinyl floor.

And this morning is one of the few occasions when we will see adults spilling drinks everywhere. Marathon runners, outside and already sodden with sweat, don't tend to be too concerned about their cups overflowing. But for the rest of the year, our cups do not overflow. We like things to be neat and tidy and hygienic.

But the image of the psalmist is one where neatness, and tidiness, and health and safety, don't feature too highly. The context is hunger, and fear of hunger. Of looking to a God who provides in superabundance, to the point of overflowing. And it may be that the image of the cup overflowing provides a basic image of Christian living in the world today.

The western world at least, has got used to a so-called culture of scarcity. There is not enough to go around, and there is not enough to last – so we need to hoard, to conserve, to store up. The IMF now seems to endorse the wisdom of this belief. I have a well meaning friend who, as a financial advisor, pities me because he says ‘to retire comfortably, you really need to have half a million.’ And even if we do manage to be successful, and to receive in abundance, even if our cup overflows – we won’t allow it to overflow for long. We’ll get a bigger cup, so that we can conserve and hoard and be prepared for a rainy day. Or in the words of Jesus, we ‘Build bigger barns’. But we convince ourselves that there is Nothing selfish about it, it’s just survival. The culture of scarcity.

The culture of the psalmist was one where scarcity was more immediate, and was felt in people’s bodies. And even there, the culture of the psalmist is not one of scarcity, but of celebrated abundance. My cup overflows.

The reading from Acts highlights how the earliest Christian community ordered itself around belief in a God who gives in superabundance. A fine example of cups overflowing. The disciples gather together, they commit their resources to the Christian community, and none of their number are left in need. They give themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship and to the breaking of bread. The picture is one of a community that works extremely well, where all celebrate together and where none are hungry. An idealistic picture of a Christian community, although it is not a blueprint that can necessarily be photocopied and passed as law in any Christian community in time and space. Instead, it seems to be a living example, an acted parable, of that celebration of the psalmist – in the midst of difficult circumstances rejoicing that his cup overflows.

So how might a contemporary example of a cup overflowing look? To begin with, even in London where we see more explicit examples of poverty and scarcity than anywhere else in Britain, people’s basic needs do seem to be met. Not always as adequately as we might like, but nevertheless, when you compare how those in 21st century London fare with those in first century Palestine, much of what the Christian community provided then is provided by our state now. Largely because of the effects of Christianity upon law, but equally, we are among those churches in London who do have an active role in providing for those who are hungry. In fact, I shared a bowl of soup with a homeless chap at Sunday Lunch just two or three weeks ago, and he argued that compared with what others provide, Bloomsbury offer a 5 star lunch – and that is a ministry of the church for which we can rightly give thanks. But it is just an example.

What difference does it make to the international crisis now facing the globe. Well perhaps the most significant experience of the psalmist happens at a deeper level. Rather than identifying a problem, going in search of a solution, and committing ourselves to a goal – it seems that if the psalmist were here today, we would be exhorted simply to worship God! It seems to be that when we worship this God, not as an escape from the harsh realities of the world, but when we worship God IN the valley of the shadow of death – when we worship God in full embrace of the misery and suffering of our world – maybe it is especially there that we encounter the blessing of God in such a way that our cup overflows.

Because the Mission of the church, is simply the overflow of God’s blessing. The Social action of the church is nothing other than the overflow of God’s blessing. The Evangelism of the church, is nothing other than the overflow of God’s blessing – spilling out over the lives of the Christian community and having an impact on the world around. At the heart of all

these worthy activities and ministries of the church, lies personal worship of a God who fills our cup to overflowing.

But, overflowing cups are messy. And we've got carpeting. We have cultural rules that stifle the overflow of God's blessing. We like things to be clean and tidy and quantifiable. But the blessing of God is wild and messy and unpredictable. We have carpeted our lives no end of cultural rules that don't like overflow:

A conservatism, that regards my own resources as my private property – and I may choose to be generous with my money, I may choose to act Christianly with my resources and share them with others. But this is not overflow. But I wonder what might happen if I were to cease regarding my resources as my own, what would happen if I ceased to regard myself as an owner, and others or even God as the grateful recipient. What if I regard myself rather as the steward of the resources with which God has blessed me? Maybe then, I might see what it means for my cup to overflow.

Or how about in worship? If I like everything to be routinely predictable, if I always expect God to speak so that he can tell me I was right all along, and all those nasty or mistaken people out there are less fortunate. Of course, I like to be challenged, but only in the way that I like to be challenged. But what if, for instance, there were any kind of emotional manifestation of losing myself in wonder, love and praise? What if worship is a place where God touches me in the very core of my being? Maybe, just maybe, we might see what it is for my cup to overflow...

And sure, I want to change the world. Sure I am aware of the injustice. But the basis of our missionary, our social, our political action in the world is worship. All of our action, all of our ethical activity, all of our mission, our evangelism, our good deeds, all of it is the overflow of God's blessing. If we want to become more effective witnesses of Jesus Christ, more progressive political activists, more penetrating social prophets – we concentrate on our worship, because all of these dimensions of Christian life and service are simply our cup overflowing.

My kids are experts at the spilling, and dropping cups on expensive carpets. And you can teach them to be careful, and to respect property and so on. But there comes a point at which you sacrifice your carpet! There comes a point at which things that what is precious to you is sacrificed because of what is even more precious to you.

And coming back to the crisis with which we began. It may be idealistic for comfortable and overfed people like me, to make pronouncements about God blessing people who are dying of hunger. But, the reading from Acts is not just a blue print for idealised Christian living. It is the story of what happened to a community of people who have encountered the resurrection of Christ.

The resurrection shows us and the world that God has not been defeated, that he has not forgotten the cries of oppressed people. In the world of the resurrection, anything can happen. Personally, politically, individually, nationally. Resurrection spells that God has not abandoned the world to human injustice, but that he acts and he blesses, here and now.

We may not relish our cup to be filled to overflowing. The blessing of God does not always yield instant satisfaction, freedom from pain, immediate bliss. This blessing of God can be

hard to swallow. There was a point at which Jesus himself begged for his cup to be taken from him. But this was the cup of salvation, the cup of blessing, the cup which overflows when we worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Following last week's sermon, in this week's lighter reading I came across a nice example in Eddie Askew's autobiography, *Edge of Daylight*. He describes a visit to a poor village home in India. They were taken inside a simple house.

'... A whiff of flue smoke from the veranda, a sudden acrid smell as dried cow dung cakes smoulder into flame, the sound of water poured into an aluminium kettle. Tea is on its way.

It can be a long time coming but that gives time for conversation. We talk briefly about the weather, then the harvest and the price of rice.... The tea arrives. It's robust. Tea leaves, sugar and milk are boiled and simmered together in the kettle. Sweet beyond imagining and often laced with root ginger and spices. Tea as you've never known it - less a drink, more an adventure.

Glass tumblers are placed before us on the earth floor. The tea is poured straight from the kettle. The tumbler fills and fills. The liquid hesitates at the rim, builds up and overflows. It slides down the glass and collects in a little pool around it. At first I wondered why it was done that way until I recognized the unspoken message. This was village hospitality. They might be poor but hospitality has no limits. No hostess would leave a grudging half inch of unfilled tumbler, she makes my cup full and running over. This was mirrored in the way wealthier people gave occasional gifts to the hospital. No one ever gave 50 or 100 or 1,000 rupees. It was always 51, 101, 1,001. The little extra every time.'

Nietzsche

Cups overflowing

Conversion

Apostles teaching,
fellowship
Breaking bread
Prayer

Conserve
Everything they had in common
miracles