

I love Acts of the Apostles. Jesus lays out a socio-economic system, but even in so far as he lives it out, he does so on the move. He is never still enough to see what works and what doesn't, beyond momentary triumphs like feeding the 5000. Acts is the practical saga of living out the Gospel for the messy, human, fallible, opinionated people who were left to get the job done. The imperfection of Acts is part of what I love about it. I can relate to imperfection.

Even with all of that imperfection, though, there is a lot of really good stuff in Acts. How to live the gospel, not just read it and pray about it, but live in it – this is the book we need now. The challenge, I think, with making use of the Bible in our every day lives is to remember both how different and how similar some things are. If we can't do that, we are unlikely to get everything we can or should, but if we do, well, then. The possibilities are endless.

Sometimes we read the Bible as if it has no context. We think of Jesus, Mary, Peter, like folks who live on the other side of the cul-de-sac: warm, fed, frustrated with life, but basically safe. We distill the urgency of their situation to match the urgency we feel about our own. For most of us in this room, even if we are under significant financial and social strain, realistically we are in much better shape than ancient Galileans. On the other hand:

The desire to normalize our own experiences can be really dangerous. We are, more so than possibly ever in history, safe, fed, housed. This makes it easy for us to overlook some pretty horrible stuff – either because it isn't happening to us, and so we don't feel the urgency, or because it is, but there is enough to distract, enough that isn't dire, that we can convince ourselves it's really no big deal. It could be worse: we could actually be ancient Galileans! Dodged that historical bullet!

So let's play compare and contrast! Anesthesia: not only can you get medical care, you can do so without watching until you pass out. Travel: you can now see the world without joining a legion or selling yourself into slavery, for a price. Creature comforts: undoubtedly life is easier now, but let's not get too excited: the Romans had hot and cold running water, steam heat, and the world's best communication system. Still, even most poor people have access to a shower now. Less danger than of destroying the equilibrium of planetary existence. No crucifixion! That feels like a big one: we no longer use public execution as a form of entertainment, but we have replaced this with the biggest prison industrial complex in the world, and seemingly unchecked police violence against the marginalized. Capitalism...wait. This one's tricky: Ancient Rome and modern America have a nearly identical economic system.

Maybe the biggest distinction between us and them, then and now is Rome was not trying to hide its systemic brutality as a means to enforce order. We are. So we are less likely to see it, more able to hide from it, and less willing to take responsibility for it. Exactly what makes us 'better' is what will keep us from noticing our own decline. And this is why it matters that we learn from Acts and decide to live a Gospel life.

In the reading today, the Sanhedrin has gathered. Why are they bothered by Jesus' followers preaching? _____

These proto-Christians were doing something that is viewed almost as radically now as it was then. After the crucifixion, they huddle up and keep to themselves. Urgently now, they pool all of their resources. If any of them have anything, they put it into the common fund. It is a matter of life and death. This quickly becomes a way of life. They are, of necessity, living the way Jesus told

them to. Through this, they ensure everyone among them is fed and clothed. If one has a house, it is opened up. If there is a physician, they treat the faithful. Even Joseph of Arimathea, a Pharisee who followed Jesus offers up his tomb. The great thing about need is it uncovers the pettiness of our ways of raising ourselves by putting others down. Urgency has a gift, if only we could hold onto it without the crisis.

In this way, the Disciples are able to heal and help. In this way, the followers of Christ are able to stay, at least the less vocal among them, out of Roman and Temple view. In this way, the proto-Christians are proving that there is no need to be dependent upon Rome for their future flourishing. For those with power, this is bad news. See, institutions – governments, corporations, churches – they hold power by convincing you that you need them to thrive, maybe even to live. And the Apostles are proving that may not be so after all. Dangerous.

Why dangerous, why not just uncomfortable? Well, Rome was, arguably, the first capitalist economy. According to historian Mike Anderson:

Capitalism is an economic system in which wealth, and the means of producing wealth, are privately owned and controlled rather than commonly, publicly, or state-owned and controlled. Through capitalism, the land, labor, and capital are owned, operated, and traded by private individuals or corporations and investments, distribution, income, production, pricing and supply of goods, commodities and services are determined by voluntary private decision in a market economy.

According to Dictionary.com the word capitalism came into existence around 1850, but two thousand years before then the Roman Republic was a capitalist economy without a definition.

Roman businessmen were born out of a middle class that didn't exist at the beginning of the Republic. In the days of the kings the ranks of the army were divided by wealth. Those at the top rank could serve in the cavalry, hence the name Knights or Equestrians. Later the Knights quit the cavalry but retained their status as the leading voting block in the Comitia Centuriata.- the senior people's assembly.

As Rome grew the demand for business grew, but the nobility considered merchant activities off limits for them – it lacked dignitas. Since there was no government administration the Senate looked to the Knights to handle the business of the Republic. The first of these “businessmen” were called Publicans. They were employed by the state to manage public contracts: to collect taxes, manage mining companies, and oversee road construction. These contracts were awarded at auction and their duration was five years.

During the Punic Wars Publicans built ships for the Roman Navy and equipped the Roman Army. The nobility began to covert the profits of the Knights and become involved in sea trade, until a law was passed in 218 BC forbidding Senators from owning ships with a larger capacity of more than 300 amphorae (1 amp= 6 gal). In 215 three Publican contractors were censured because they provided financing to Spanish tribes (the enemy). They scuttled their ships and sued the Republic for reimbursement for the loss.

The Senate chose to utilize the Knights commercially, instead of creating a civil service, and disregarded their political claims. But the power of the Knights grew and they were able to exert great influence as a class. In 169 BC the censor Tiberius Gracchus cancelled all Publican contracts because of corruption, but the Knights rebelled and accused him of treason against the state. Tiberius was

acquited, but the Knights has flexed their muscles.

By the fall of the Republic there were hundreds of corporations selling shares to investors. Manufacturing and trades flourished: including furniture making, leatherwork, weaving, metalworking, stoneworking, and food processing.

development goes like this: tribal leaders and kings of small territories control the people near them by allowing greater farming rights to their favorites (food is the driving motivation at this point). The bigger the territory, the more people want to invade it. You need an army to defend the land, and people are willing because land is food and security. Anyone can fight with a stick, but to have weapons that will increase the chances you live requires resources. The king offers free housing and food to the blacksmith and his family, so long as he makes weapons for you and the supporters you deem worthy. And only them. Now that you have fighters, you lack farmers. You need to trade. A merchant class develops to meet the need. Large homes become fortified castles. Wealthy landowners seek to impress each other to form good alliances through marriage.