

Sermon 27 April 2014

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 and John 20:19-end

Last Sunday morning (at 9.45) Ian challenged us to walk the cross. Not in a 'pick up your cross and follow me' sense, but as an illustration of faith – both believing and trusting in Christ. A large wooden cross was laid between two chairs, about a foot above the ground. Three people, young and older, agreed that they believed that the cross would hold their weight and as they put that into action by walking across it, they trusted that it would not break and they would not fall.

Jesus acknowledged Thomas's need to see before he could believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. In the same way that each of the disciples had needed to, starting with John himself. However, Jesus then goes on to bless anyone who will believe without having seen the risen Jesus.

I wonder how many of you listen to 'From our own correspondent' on Radio 4. Each week, an average of 5 BBC journalists around the world, present a short word picture of a story behind the headlines from the country they are based in. It gives a glimpse into the reality of some aspect of life in often very difficult circumstances. It is often very moving. Channel 4 has just started doing a television version – 'Unreported World'. Whilst very interesting, it is surprising that it takes 30 minutes when using film, to tell a similar story to that which, on the radio, is told so clearly in just 6 minutes. Though, I have to say, the pictures tend to stay in my mind longer than the words do.

So, do we need more than just words to convince us? Thomas needed to see Jesus. Those walking the cross last Sunday needed to see what they were being asked to believe and trust in before having a go.

The Church Times this week has two examples of those for whom the words of the Bible were crucial.

First, Rhidian Brook. Having grown up attending a Welsh Baptist Chapel but reaching young adulthood with no real connection to faith, he was recovering from a bad experience with unfertilised marijuana, when he started to read the Bible. He was ill and feeling very low. He chose John's Gospel which he describes as the most drug friendly gospel (I'm not telling this by way of a recommendation by the way). He experienced a dramatic conversion based on a massive explosion of: 'This is dealing with all the things I'm worried about'. He says he found a real sense of purpose, the idea that life is more meaningful than he had realised. He 'loved life before, but the idea that there is a spiritual dimension to it, that there is a God who wants to be involved – that was extraordinary'. You might know some of his work – he writes scripts for television, like Silent Witness and contributes to Thought for the Day. In some sense his illness was as much a part of coming to faith as were the words he read.

Second is another person you are more likely to recognise from TV – David Suchet who plays what many will think of as the definitive Poirot. He came to faith reading Paul's letter to the Romans in a hotel Bible, as if it had just been sent to him through the post. He says that by the time he got to the end he found a world view that he had been looking for all his life. But, he describes his conversion as being 'dragged kicking and screaming into the Kingdom'. He has just finished recording a reading of the entire Bible. He says it was important to

realise that every single name mentioned in the Bible is a human being. The Bible is all of humanity and our relationship with God.

To these two men, the words came to life. I'm not a musician, but if I were, no doubt I would have found similar examples of words and music bringing faith into being. Some in the settings of anthems and choral music, others in the lyrics of U2.

And if we need more than words (as I think most of us do) what is that extra thing we need? Often it will be a thing that comes before we ever engage with the words. For faith, believing and trusting is more a matter of relationship than it is of creed. A relationship with Jesus so often begins in the relationships we have with those around us.

I have been very blessed in my working life to work alongside some wonderful people. In fact, the difficult ones stand out in my memory because there have been so few! Of those wonderful people there have been some who have been exceptional. I've said goodbye to two recently. One has retired and I will keep in touch with her and continue to explore the truths, similarities and differences in our faiths – she practises Buddhism. The other died before he could retire. He was just a little older than me. I wasn't able to go to his funeral. But those who did, came back to share with us the stories they had heard about his walk with God and with God's people. I hadn't talked to him about his faith but I had experienced his gentleness, his integrity, his desire to give of his best, to listen to others less experienced than himself and his readiness to share his knowledge. I also knew about the times when he hadn't got things right, for being a Christian doesn't make you perfect or even good. He had been a beacon within our work community. His way of life had been a signpost to something beyond himself and his death has, for one person at least, been the impulse she needed to start exploring more, to find out more about who Jesus is.

And of course, our relationships with one another in this place will also be for some the signpost they need. The sense we have of a common purpose, even though we might each be entirely different in our preferences. We want the best for each other. We grieve with those who mourn, we celebrate with those who know joy, we sit alongside those who are waiting, we pray for each other. We do so, not because we want the club to continue, we do so because this is where we have found our spiritual home.

So, if someone asks you this week what you did at the weekend, why not include the fact that you came to church amongst all the other exciting and interesting and mundane things you did? It adds to the picture they have of you. It adds another letter to the signpost. They might think you are weird, but I often find it leads to some interesting conversations.

Amen

Sarah Thomas 27 April 2014

