

Easter Sunday 2017

'Tell it different – John's Resurrection account and Personality Difference' by Mark Pilgrim

One of the glories of life is that we are all different. Married couples share a lot together – but they can still be aware of differences between them after 20, 30, 40, 50 or 60 years and more of marriage. And sisters and brothers will differ from each other emotionally, socially and politically - even though their parents are the same and they may be brought up very similarly. Much of this is down to different personality type, which psychologists have revelled in describing from Freud and Jung onwards.

My first experience of different personality types being taken seriously in my own work environment was when I was a curate and involved in taking the Belbin Test. Belbin describes people within teams as having strengths as a Plant, a Specialist, an Evaluator, a Resource Investigator, a Co-ordinator, a Teamworker, a Shaper, an Implementer, and (that's enough, isn't it?) – oh yes, a Completer Finisher! When I took it 30 years ago, my preferences and strengths were revealed as Plant – someone who sprouts ideas – and Resource Investigator – someone who likes to research lots of possibilities, whether tried and tested or new and risky, before they come to a conclusion. Am I still sprouting ideas? Am I still keen to look at different possibilities, even though they may seem crazy to other people? I'll leave you to tell me whether I have changed at all over the last 30 years!

If you are at a loose end in front of a computer screen, you can do worse than google 'Personality type' and 'Jesus' disciples'. When I googled this last week, I came up with 10,400 results! That's 10,400 internet references – not 10,400 personality types... though you could be forgiven for thinking this might be the case!

It's clear for a start that, among Jesus's disciples, Peter has a very distinctive personality. Asked to describe him, what are the words that come quickly to mind? 'Impetuous'...'Puts his foot in it'...'Jumps in with both feet'...'acts before he thinks'...'Hot headed' etc etc: the list can go on for quite a long time.

Different personality types are also clear between Jesus' friends, the sisters Mary and Martha. Martha is the doer – the activist, the practical one. Mary is the reflective one, the one who prefers to listen to Jesus rather than to serve him dinner.

So, if we turn our attention to the disciples in the account of Jesus' resurrection in today's Easter Gospel, what do we see? I suggest we see three different disciples –each with a different personality type, each with a different way of responding to Jesus' resurrection.

Peter, of course, runs to the tomb and goes in without pause for thought. He sees Jesus' grave clothes in one part of the tomb and the cloth wound around his head in another.

Peter's companion, simply identified as 'the other disciple' outruns Peter and gets to the tomb first. Commentators have wondered about this detail over the years. Was it because John was younger or fitter than Peter? One ancient commentary wonders whether it was

because Peter was married and the other disciple wasn't – though quite what this has to do with the speed they run at, I am not sure!

What we see in the Gospel, though, is that the two disciples behave in quite distinct ways. John, the quicker one, looks in the tomb but does not go straight in. It's Peter who goes straight in. John follows once Peter has seen the grave clothes placed in different places. Once in, the Gospel writer says, John 'saw and believed'. Maybe John was always more reflective, more deeply thinking than Peter – and this is the writer's way of bringing this difference between the disciples out at this point. Describing Peter and John as doing nothing more than 'return to their homes', the writer quickly draws our attention to the first disciple in our passage: not Peter or John but Mary Magdalene.

The details around Mary Magdalene are very distinctive. The first thing we are told is Mary travels to the tomb 'while it was still dark'. What are we to make of this detail? We could say that Mary's willingness to travel to the tomb on her own at night shows that she is a brave, courageous disciple, someone who takes risks and shows great faith.

At the sight of the stone rolled away from the tomb's entrance, she runs back to Peter and the other disciple. She looks for the company and help of other people to work out what has happened to Jesus. With the words 'Mary stood weeping' we gather that Mary is upset and moved. While weeping she nevertheless has courage to look in the tomb – and here she sees something different to Peter and John. Rather than grave clothes in two different places, the 4th Evangelist reports her as seeing two angels. What can we make of this? One suggestion is that the two men's 'vision' is entirely literal, earth-bound and material – while the woman's vision is spiritual and more attuned to God's transcendent presence in the world: some difference indeed!

In classic 4th gospel style, Jesus asks Mary a question but she doesn't read all the signals correctly. She misinterprets the situation and thinks Jesus is 'the gardener'. Well, of course, as God's agent of growth, as the sower of seeds and the planter of a new and vibrant kingdom, Jesus can rightly be described as 'the gardener'. But the 4th Evangelist wants and needs to make it clear that Jesus's task, guided by God, is to make good people's mistakes. Jesus' task is to restore right understanding and right relationship between God and his fallible people. So, in the second exchange of conversation, Jesus addresses Mary personally and uses her name. Mary's response is quick: she utters the single word 'Rabbouni', 'Teacher', immediately identifying her as a student and female disciple of a Jewish Rabbi.

The passage ends with Jesus the Teacher giving his student, as all good teachers do, a significant job, a unique responsibility: to tell the disciples of his resurrection. Mary - this courageous, risk-taking woman – does so to great effect, telling the disciples 'I have seen the Lord' – and so becoming, as tradition is keen to describe her – the apostle to the apostles.

It's amazing to realise, but the 4th Evangelist could have told the same story in just 24 words: for example, "Mary Magdalene, Peter and John went to the tomb. They saw the linen wrappings lying there and believed Jesus had risen from the dead." But no. The writer tells his story of the Resurrection through the experience and witness of three very different

people. Peter, the gaff prone, 'act before you think' enthusiast. John, the other disciple, more hesitant, more reflective and noted for deep belief. And Mary – a follower and friend of Jesus with a troubled past, a courageous, risk-taking woman who is deemed by Jesus as someone who looks to him for teaching and clarity to be the right person to start spreading the good news of the resurrection far and wide -starting with Peter, John and the other disciples.

You see: difference and diversity among Christ's disciples is important. We are not all made the same. We are made and made to be different. This is as important for the Christian community today as it was in Jesus' own time – among his 12 inner circle disciples and among the wider group of women and men who followed and supported him.

The question is, though, what, in these darkening days of 2017, do we do with our knowledge of God's purposes, our experience of God's love and our responsibility to bring other people to faith in him? Right from the beginning of the Christian community's birth and the charge to help bring the world into saving relationship with God, God has included and used different personalities within the Christian team - not always harmoniously. Paul was different – more intellectual and more generous than Peter. Lydia was wealthier and more influential in the Acts of the Apostles than many of her male contemporaries. So it has gone on through the centuries.

And now the challenge is before us. How are we carrying out the charge first given to Mary and then to all the disciples from Ascension and Pentecost on, to make disciples of all the nations? Because, make no mistake about it, the nations and especially their leaders are in deep and desperate need of becoming disciples. Plenty has been made, before and after his election, of Donald Trump's personality. I've seen him variously described as a pathological narcissist, a misogynist and a bully – and these are just the descriptions that it is polite and appropriate for me to use in a sermon. Coming ever more sharply into focus, on the one hand, is the personality of Kim Jong Un, the North Korean leader – about whom not a lot is known, except that he seems paranoid enough about his own position to have his half-brother murdered even though there is no evidence at all that the half-brother had any ambitions to be North Korea's leader. Then there is President Bashir Assad of Syria – a dictator and denier of the truth of the first order...backed up by Vladimir Putin, whose vanity and need to be seen as powerful and in control seems to know no bounds.

The need to proclaim the good news of God's gift of new life in Christ is as sharp and as urgent today as it was in the first disciples' time of oppression under Roman totalitarian rule. God brought the Christian community into being and grew it by different people communicating God's offer of new life, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in different ways to different people. I invite you now to spend some moments contemplating your opportunities to use your time, your talents and your unique personality to bring those around you into saving relationship with God through Christ., and then I will offer a short prayer.

Lord, we pray your Spirit will guide us to be faithful and effective in bringing people to new or deeper faith in Christ through our personality differences. Amen.