

Witness: Telling the world

Over the last few weeks, we've been looking at what it might mean to be people *'fully alive, together and as individuals, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ.'* So far, we've considered how, as church, we are the body of Christ, a body with many different parts but working together for the benefit of the whole. We've thought about the various gifts and abilities that God gives to each and every one of us and how we use those gifts to serve him, one another and the community in which we live. The Bishop also spoke on this during our service of thanksgiving and celebration two weeks ago. And last week, we considered what it means to be holy as Jesus was holy - seeing ourselves as God sees us, and becoming more like Jesus, so that, through us, people get a glimpse of the kingdom.

This week we pick up the theme of 'Witness: Telling the world about Jesus'. There is a question in the 'Commission' that comes at the end of adult baptism and confirmation services that asks: *'Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?'* And the enthusiastic response is: *'With the help of God, I will.'* In our reading from Romans today, Paul introduces

himself as a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, with the urgent task of passing the message onto others. But, if we're honest, it's *this* aspect of discipleship – the expectation that we will share our faith with others – that gives most of us the heebie jeebies! Ask me to do *anything* else – bake a cake, sort a raffle, hand out hymn books, operate the sound-desk ... but talk about my faith? I'd rather run a marathon, dressed as a duck, in 30 degrees heat, backwards!

But we're not alone. *Many* Christians find the idea of evangelism really daunting, though many also take comfort in some advice attributed to St Francis: *'Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.'*

But Christian witness actually is quite simple isn't it, because it's just about sharing good news. This is something we do quite naturally and quite often. Things I've said this week include:

'Hasn't it been a lovely week of weather? Summer has clearly arrived!'

England cricketers beat Australia 5-0 in the one-day series. What an achievement! Particularly after the 4-0 defeat in the ashes only 6 months ago.'

'Can't wait for Sam and Alexa's wedding this Saturday. It's

been great getting to know them over the last few months. And they plan to carry on coming to church. Isn't that brilliant!'

'Another new family in church last week. Great that God is answering our prayer for growth.'

And I posted a review on Amazon telling people about a fantastic cleaning product I'd bought for getting rid of the lime scale in the shower.

So, *why* can I wax lyrical about a shower de-scaler but struggle, like most Christians, to talk about my faith? And I'm the one who everyone expects to find it easy. I'm the one wearing the dog collar after all.

Is it that we're not sure what the good news actually is? But we all know that verse from John's gospel that sums up the Good News perfectly:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'

This passage may well be one of the most heard Bible verses. It's often seen on posters, the side of buses, car

stickers, mugs, on football shirts, on tattoos. As Christians, we believe *this* is the greatest news we could ever hear: that God, - Creator of the universe and all in it – loves *us* – inexplicably, unconditionally and eternally. We know it, but how do we communicate it? If I'm honest, I'd never go near repeating this verse if I wanted to share the Good News with someone who didn't know Jesus. Why? Because it contains a lot of Christian doctrine that's really hard to explain – incarnation, salvation, the nature of God, justification by faith, eternal life – and what many of us really worry about in sharing our faith, is that we don't feel confident in talking about these big issues.

But I think we worry too much. We overthink it. And so we often duck out of it altogether. If someone asks us what we did at the weekend, we'll talk about *everything* else we did but fail to mention we went to church. And maybe that's because we worry what people will think about us, but it might also be because we worry that they'll ask us about our faith:

'Why do you go to church then?'

'Do you really believe all that stuff? Isn't it all a bit far-fetched?'

'So what difference does going to church make to your life.'

And that's often the crux of it. People want to know what *difference* it makes. What *impact* does trusting in Jesus make in your life? And we clam up, afraid that we'll mess up a God-given opportunity to talk about Jesus, or that we'll come across as seriously weird.

But can I suggest a way forward. A way forward that often works for me, and so might work for you. And it's about story.

Think about a story in the Bible that you never tire of hearing. Your absolute favourite. It could be one of Jesus' parables. It could be about a real person. It could be something that Jesus said. And, whenever someone asks why you believe in Jesus, tell them the story.

One of my favourite stories in the Bible is the parable of the lost son.

So, to the question: 'Why do I believe in Jesus?'

Well, one day the tax collectors and sinners of the day were gathering around to hear him. These were the 'wrong sort' of people that the Pharisees thought Jesus

should be spending time with. So Jesus told this amazing story. A story of two sons. The younger one decided that he couldn't wait for his father to die before inheriting his share of the family wealth so he demanded it there and then. His father must have been heartbroken. The son leaves and very quickly the money is gone and he's destitute. He ends up getting a job feeding somebody else's pigs, comes to his senses and makes a plan. *'I'll go back home,'* he thinks, *'admit to my dad that I got it all wrong, and ask if he'll take me on as a worker until I've paid off what I owe him.'* But, here's the beauty of the story. While he was still a long way off, his dad sees him. How? Because he was looking. He never gave up hope that his son would come home. So, he's at the door looking. And filled with love for the boy, when he sees him he runs – which no respectful Jewish man ever did, hitch up your robes and run – he runs towards his son, and before he gets a word out, he's got his arms around him and is kissing him. And here's the real surprise. *No* words of condemnation. *No* words of disappointment. *No* *'I told you so.'* Just instant forgiveness and huge celebration that his son, who he thought was lost to him, is home.

Why do I love this story? Because this story could be any one of us. It could be me. It often is. Going my own way, doing my own thing. Walking away from God, away from what I know is good for me. Believing that *I* know best. And Jesus tells a story to the very people who need to hear that God the Father loves them. Those on the outside, those that everyone looked down their noses at. Loves them for who they are. And couldn't love them any more or any less for anything they've done or haven't done. A God who is there watching and waiting during the times we pull away, ready to throw his arms around us when we return. That's the God I believe in, and that's the God I want to share.

But, what is it for you? And, whatever it is for you, practise the story. Think about why it's important to you. How it speaks into your life. And tell it simply and honestly. Be as real as you can be. Because if you do, it will be like being on a light stand. It's *that* attractive.

That lovely passage from Mathew's gospel read earlier, but from the Message translation. Jesus' words to his disciples:

Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine!

'Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?'

'With the help of God, we will.'

Let's pray:

Dear Lord,

There have been times we've been afraid to light our lamp;

it seems so dull, so uninspiring.

We have been afraid to share our faith with others; our words seem so clumsy, so full of us and not of you.

Give us the courage to put our gifts

on the lampstand of your love

and use us to be your voice, your hands, today and every day.

We pray in your holy name.

Amen.