

Sermon 22-04-24 Witness

John 20:19-end

As we empty the Easter egg boxes and the children go back to school it's easy for us to feel that Easter is over. But the Easter season continues until Pentecost at the start of June. We are still at the beginning, not the end. Harder still for us to understand how the disciples felt immediately after that first Easter morning. They must also have had a sense of something ending, and of new beginnings, but without the benefit of 2000 years of hindsight or the rhythm of the church's year that we have.

They were so disorientated that at the start of today's gospel story we find them hiding away in an upper room. Jesus appears and anoints them with the breath of the Holy Spirit. And then there is Thomas, missing on that first evening, but later protesting 'Unless I see the nail marks on his hands I will not believe it.'

What a contrast this makes with the words of Peter and the other apostles in the reading from Acts. 'We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit.'

I won't spoil the story by reminding us all what happened in the weeks between these two incidents – it is certainly a case of tune in next week for a further episode of this exciting adventure – but I have been thinking about the belligerence of Thomas, 'I must see for myself', and the fervour of Peter, telling his story publicly. It set me thinking about how we church goers can appear to others.

I think I should apologise at this point if you are getting a feeling of déjà vu. I wanted to check something out in a previous sermon and realised that the last time I preached here on a Sunday I spoke about contrasts and will later quote again from the same book.

It is not unusual for me to end up as a steward on the Good Friday walk of witness and being a steward means that everyone on the walk will go past you several times – you get to see everyone. It's not unusual for me to do a double take at some point when I see someone that I know but had no idea had any sort of church connection. That works both ways, so I have also been approached mid hot cross bun at the Baptist church after the walk by people equally surprised to see me. Not for nothing is it called a walk of witness. But it does make me think about how open or secretive we are about our faith. How approachable we are.

Which leads me to that book – Dear England by the Archbishop of York. He was in conversation with a stranger who commented that:

'when she met people of faith, she found they largely broke down into two categories. For the first group, faith seemed to be their hobby. They went to church – or, for that matter, the synagogue, the mosque, the temple – but it didn't make much difference to the life they led.'

'The other group "embraced their faith so tightly, it frightened everyone else away".'

That's my question this morning - to myself as much as to you all – where do I sit in demonstrating my faith to others? Am I approachable, scary or just plain offputting?

Is it just a hobby? There is no doubt that I really enjoy getting stuck into Messy Church, or acting out Bible stories at Widney School. But am I so busy with these activities that I am compromising my own relationship with God? Has church become a club where I see my friends but have lost sight of why we are really here?

It is good to feel part of a community, part of a church community. It is helpful to know that there are people to turn to when we need them. The first disciples were together in that room when Jesus came to them, they needed that sense of belonging, just as we often need to feel that we belong.

Do I shout it out like Peter and the apostles so that it embarrasses the authorities (and others)? Is there room in my picture of faith for others to have different views, or can I be dogmatic about my own view?

Do I struggle to believe like Thomas struggled? It is hard to see how his belligerent statement would encourage others in faith. But once he did believe his belief was as strong as anyone's. He was the first to refer to Jesus as 'my God'. For some that extreme change of heart would be more encouraging, more real, than someone who never doubted.

Do I frighten others away? I remember a girl at school who was so obviously disapproving of others' attempts to wear uniform so that it didn't look like uniform that she had few friends. I'm sure you remember the hitched up skirts, the hat stuffed into our bags, and the rolled up sleeves. We didn't need her to follow our example,

just be more tolerant of it. Am I sometimes also too narrow in my views on how we should behave?

That's a lot of questions and I am offering no answers, only the suggestion that you might think about what those answers would be. They will be fluid, different for different situations and for each one of us.

Jesus said, 'As the Father has sent me. I am sending you.' We are sent to bear witness to our faith. That may include on the Good Friday walk, or just by being open about why we are not available on a Sunday morning. But most of all let's not frighten others away by our attitudes. If we don't tell others about God's love how will they ever know and if we become unapproachable how will we ever tell them.