

His witnesses

22 4 12

Almighty Father,
who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples
with the sight of the risen Lord:
give us such knowledge of his presence with us,
that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life
and serve you continually in righteousness and truth.

My text is from the end of today's gospel and is Luke chapter 24 verse 48: 'You are witnesses of these things.'

It is good to be here with you again for a second time. It is kind of Robin and Brian to invite me to preach this morning and to celebrate Holy Communion. I bring you fraternal greetings from the church of St Bartholomew, Dinard, and our prayers that your work to develop a living church here in La Vendée bears, in due time, much fruit.

Easter was only two weeks ago. Our church was full of folk of different nationalities come together to celebrate in English the joy of the empty tomb, the consequential fact that on the third day, as promised, Jesus had risen from the grave. Belief in the resurrection is at the heart of our faith, belief in a loving God who gives us life in the first place and who, after we die, will revive and restore us to the life of the world to come. Exciting or what?

And excitement is the key note to our gospel today. Unique to Luke is the account of the road to Emmaus in which Cleopas and his companion personally encounter the risen Lord Jesus when he opens their hearts and minds to the scripture then opens their eyes to his presence with them in the blessing and breaking of the bread. Without hesitation, the pair, their hearts on fire from their unlooked-for meeting, return uphill some seven miles to Jerusalem to share their excitement with the disciples.

When they arrive, they hear how Jesus has also appeared to Peter. Then, to their amazement, Jesus appears among them. And it is this wonderful surprise which marks the start of today's gospel passage.

The disciples are understandably shocked. Despite Jesus' reassuring greeting, 'Peace be with you', Luke describes those present as 'startled and terrified'. So Jesus tries to put them at ease by putting their fear into words: 'Why are you frightened?' 'Why do doubts arise in your hearts?' Fear and doubt – all very human – and I very much doubt that in the circumstances we would be any different. To confirm who he is, Jesus shows them his hands and his feet, the marks of the nails in his flesh. To reassure them, he invites them to touch him. To prove he's not a ghost but flesh and blood like them, he eats some cooked fish. Jesus confirms he is the Messiah and commissions them with the task of spreading the good news about the resurrection and our consequential, new, restored relationship with God.

And so we come today's text: 'You are witnesses of these things.' But what does it mean to be a witness?

A witness is someone who knows the truth of something that they have experienced directly for themselves. First-hand, the twelve disciples heard Jesus preach, saw him act, lived with him throughout his three year ministry. And here and now, they have tangible proof of his resurrection when like Mary Magdalene they may have given Jesus a hug !

A witness is someone who is called on to testify – to express in words what they know to be true. So the disciples become apostles, people sent out to share with others the truth of what they had experienced for themselves. And so Bartholomew, after whom my church in Dinard is dedicated, took the gospel to Armenia where he was martyred for our faith by being flayed alive.

And it is not just them but us who are called to be witnesses. First we have to experience the truth of the gospel for ourselves: head knowledge as we understand the truth of scripture; heart knowledge as we feel the touch of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And energised by whom and what we know, we can speak to others by sharing our faith in a way that speaks to them. It's no good casting our pearls before swine. We need to know to whom we are talking and how to say what we have to say in a way that speaks meaningfully to our audience. If not, our witness is wasted, our words falling on deaf ears or the seeds we are trying to plant scattered on unfertile ground.

But that's another story and all I want to leave you with this morning is the extraordinary excitement of Easter, of Jesus' resurrection from the dead; and that we too at this time and in this place are called to be witnesses to that truth.

My text today applies not only to the apostles but also to all of us:

'You are witnesses of these things.'

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

All Saints, La Vendée

22nd April, 2012

H: Sermon 25: Witness

