

Sermon - Second Sunday of Easter 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020

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May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and may God's words touch our hearts today. Amen.

Both our readings today were about people telling others about the risen Jesus. I would like to have a bit of a look at these and how they relate to us. The first thing I'd like to consider is from our first reading from Acts. The person standing up and speaking here in front of the crowds is the same person that 2 months before was denying that he even knew who Jesus was. Had he been on an intensive public speaking course? We're not told, but I think it's very unlikely. Peter was still, at heart, the fisherman that Jesus called from his day job to follow him. He was still the man that spoke before thinking. So what had changed?

The obvious, and probably only, answer is that this happened on Pentecost Sunday, just after he had received the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit within Peter changed him from an ordinary fisherman into a spokesperson for Jesus.

This wasn't like me preaching at Christ Church or St Johns. When I stand up to preach I am standing in front of 5 or 50 people who want to support me. If I speak utter rubbish, I will be told that but no-one is going to hit me or throw anything at me. Peter was standing in front of a crowd that must have had at least 3,000 people in it (since that is the number we are told became believers at the end of Peter's speech).

To put this into some perspective, since I couldn't visualise 3,000 people, the Alhambra seats 1,400 people while the Royal Albert Hall seats just over 5,200. So Peter is talking to a crowd that could pretty much fill the Royal Albert Hall.

Added to the numbers, it was a hostile crowd. These would have been many of the same people that were calling for Jesus to be crucified. They come together and were jeering and saying that the disciples were drunk. Finally there was Peter's message itself.

Peter started by telling them that they knew Jesus had done signs that proved he was from God because they had seen what Jesus had done. He then put the blame for Jesus' death on them. He then went on to tell them what they would not have known about Jesus' resurrection. He gives them 2 different reasons to believe what he is saying, he uses their knowledge of the scriptures and he uses their personal experience.

This is at one end of the spectrum, our gospel reading is at the other end. In our gospel reading we have the disciples speaking to 1 person, Thomas, someone they knew well. It doesn't matter how many people we are talking to, what is important is that we do talk. The current situation of distancing and staying home means that we are not able to meet with those people that we normally talk to, but it does give us an opportunity to see and speak to other people that we wouldn't normally be around. Let's see if we can use this opportunity to talk to other people about our risen saviour, Jesus.

The second point I would like to pick up on was mentioned above but I'll expand on it now. In both our readings, the person witnessing to Jesus' resurrection was speaking from their own experience. This is particularly obvious in our gospel reading when the other disciples told Thomas "We have seen the Lord" (v25).

Most of us have not had the chance to study theology. Many of us are not able to quote large passages of the bible. But all of us are able to speak about what we have experienced. For some of us that could be a dramatic event, a particular healing, blessing or calling. But for others there won't be anything special.

Before my calling to become a reader I can only really think of a couple of events that were small things, but I felt that I knew God in them. However, my calling was, for me, quite dramatic. I knew something was up and the week or month around that event was something I am unlikely to forget in a hurry. Since then, it's gone back to quiet involvement, I can see, looking back, where God was moving and helping but it has been nowhere near as noticeable.

Each of us has met Jesus in different ways. It will be when talking about what we know that other people will recognise that there is something about what we are saying, they will recognise honesty. If we try to bluff with what we are saying, exaggerating or making things up so that it isn't real, it will soon be recognised as false.

The last thing I'd like to mention is to do with how Thomas got his "nickname" of Doubting Thomas. He was approached by a group of his friends, people he had been with for the last 3 years, telling him "We have seen the Lord". What was his response? "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." (v25)

However, did the others manage any better? If we look at the end of Mark, we find the following passage. When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen them they did not believe it. Afterwards, Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen" (Mark 16:9-14)

Even these people that had been close to Jesus throughout the 3 years of his ministry struggled to believe what they were hearing. It seemed like absolute nonsense.

If these people that knew Jesus did not believe when they were told that Jesus was alive, we have to accept that not everyone that we tell will believe. It's tough when someone you love doesn't share your faith and won't accept what you say. It's even harder when they refuse to even listen. But it's not a reason to give up.

Thomas didn't believe when he was told by the other disciples that Jesus was alive, but when he later met with Jesus, he gives one of the most explicit declarations in the Gospels, "My Lord and my God!". Would this have been his response if he had met Jesus without having heard about his resurrection first?

We may not be believed when we speak to others, but what we don't know, and possibly never will, is what our witness has led to in the future.

So just to recap as I finish off. • The disciples we have been reading about were not trained orators but ordinary people that were witnessing to what they knew. We also don't need any special training to talk to others about what we know. • The best thing to talk about is our personal experience. Making things up or trying to exaggerate what we know will be identified as untruth and will probably lead to what we are saying being rejected. • Finally, don't get discouraged if you are not believed. You are not the first person to be disbelieved and you won't be the last. Do your best when speaking to people and then the rest is up to God to handle as he will.