

Witnesses

Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36-48

Whenever there is a road accident the Police immediately make two appeals. The first is for clues. 'The Police are searching for clues' says the newsreader. At that point my father was always itching to phone up and say, 'Here I am.' But the second appeal is the one that is relevant today: the Police need witnesses.

And I guess that the importance of witnesses to any incident cannot be over estimated. You see, if two car drivers collide, they can often have different interpretations of what happened. You know how it is: the first one shout,

'Why don't you look where you are going ?'

The second replies

'You shouldn't have been going so fast'.

This is called road rage.

And if they do not agree on what happened then the matter can often only be resolved by an appeal to a third party, to onlookers, to witnesses.

It is as if until there are witnesses the accident is just part of the imagination of those who took part. It is entirely subjective without any evidence of what is true and what is false. The coming forward of witnesses, however, makes it all real, makes it objective.

And being a witness is no easy job. At the very least it is inconvenient: you have to make statements to the police; you may have to appear in court. Occasionally it can be dangerous in criminal cases as witnesses may be intimidated and need protection.

Today's Gospel ends with Jesus telling his disciples,

'You are witnesses to all this.'

And 'all this' means the resurrection of Jesus himself. Being a witness to the resurrection means telling others that it has really taken place. That Jesus has been killed and that he is alive again. And the disciples undoubtedly found being witnesses both an inconvenience and a danger. It involved a change in their way of life. They were called to go travelling, preaching and healing at the expense of family life and their normal employment. It involved many of them being persecuted and ultimately murdered. The earliest saints of the church, like Peter, Paul and Thomas, were all martyrs: they died for their faith.

It may seem as if that phase in the church's life is now over. Those who ate grilled fish with the risen Christ or who walked with him to Emmaus or who met him in the garden are long since dead. But from time to time in the mass we use an acclamation with the words,

Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ will come again.

And there is a well known Easter hymn which begins with the words 'Jesus Christ is risen today.'

In both cases it is not that Christ 'has' risen but Christ 'is' risen. The resurrection of Christ is not only something that happened two thousand years ago. It is something that remains true. Jesus is alive.

But rather like the facts of a road accident it has no objective reality until there are witnesses. And witnesses must come forward and give their evidence. From time to time members of this congregation, usually at Soulfood on Tuesday nights, speak about how Jesus, God, has changed their lives. That is an explicit form of witness.

But we witness in many other ways. We witness simply by being here. By having the determination to set aside a couple of hours of prime time every week specifically for God. By accepting that the inconvenience is justified. For some people it requires courage to be in church on a Sunday morning. They may have family members who mock them, who despair of them for taking it all so seriously. In twenty first century Britain we may never have to risk death for our faith but some people can make life very uncomfortable for those who want to witness to the resurrection..

We witness every time we speak. Sometimes we witness in a negative ways as when we slag people off or make racist comments. And people will think, 'O those Christians are just like the rest of us.'

Or as S John put it:

Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar."

1 John 2:4

But at our best we witness by speaking up for those who are poor or marginalized. A few years ago I overheard a group of eighteen year olds having a discussion about voting intentions in the light of the local elections. The discussion turned round which party would be most effective in cutting taxes for their parents. They were all the children of comfortably off parents. But one of the teenagers took a different view. He said that the purpose of government was to care for the least well off and if that meant that those who were better off were asked to support those who were worse off then that was what was right. That teenager was standing up for what was right. Or, in the language of St John, he was acting as a witness to the truth.

But the most profound witness to the truth lies not in what we say, even in defence of the poorest in society; it lies in what we do, how we treat our fellow human beings. As ever John puts his finger on it:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4: 7. 11-12

What we are witnesses to is that God loved us so much that he died for us. And we witness to that by loving others in the same way.

But we love not out of a gritty determination to do so. We love because in some way we have met the risen Christ. I say 'in some way' because it is clear from the accounts in the bible that meeting the risen Christ was a very mysterious and even ambiguous experience. We heard today that the eleven disciples thought they were seeing a ghost! But we are here because in some way we have met the Christ who is alive today. Having met the risen Christ will change us.

It changes me because I know that he died for my sins. That has an incredibly humbling effect. I may think I am a great and noble person, full of idealism, full of courage. But the reality is that the evil I see on my TV screen, violence in Syria, violence in Florida, violence in BD3, is perpetuated by people just like me. Our flesh is the same. And in Christ's death on the cross I see a dreadful image of the cost of my sin. But at the same time I see that Jesus is willing to pay the price himself. He is willing to absorb the effect of my sin. And the result of that is new life in the resurrection. It is a bit of good luck that in the northern hemisphere we celebrate Easter in the springtime when we have symbols of new life everywhere from daffodils to Easter bunnies! They may be sentimental but they are real. And the new life in our own hearts is real too through the spirit of Jesus.

It is that new life to which we are called to act as witnesses. Not our own virtue; not our own strength of character; not even our own sense of duty. We witness to the risen Christ and we witness because we are, in the words of St John, children of God.

N Clews

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