

## Easter Sunday 2019

Today we are beginning a journey. It's a journey of 50 days from Easter to Pentecost. It's a journey first done by the apostles and disciples of Jesus some 2000 years ago. For them it was a journey from discovering the resurrection to knowing the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a journey from doubt and fear, through personal transformation to a sense of belonging to something much bigger than themselves, for the day of Pentecost is regarded as the birthday of the Church. Before the day of Pentecost there were individual disciples of Jesus; after the day of Pentecost there was a sense that those individual Christians were part of a body, working together as members of that body. In cooperation. In collaboration.

Today we read about that extraordinarily hesitant start of that journey. Mary Magdalene is at the empty tomb. Two angels appear to her and she tells them

they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they  
have laid him. John 20:13

She is focused solely on finding a dead body and when she does meet Jesus she assumes he is the gardener and she asks him where he has put his own body! But when she is finally convinced of the truth of the resurrection and tells it to Jesus's other followers, 'these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.' (Luke 24:11)

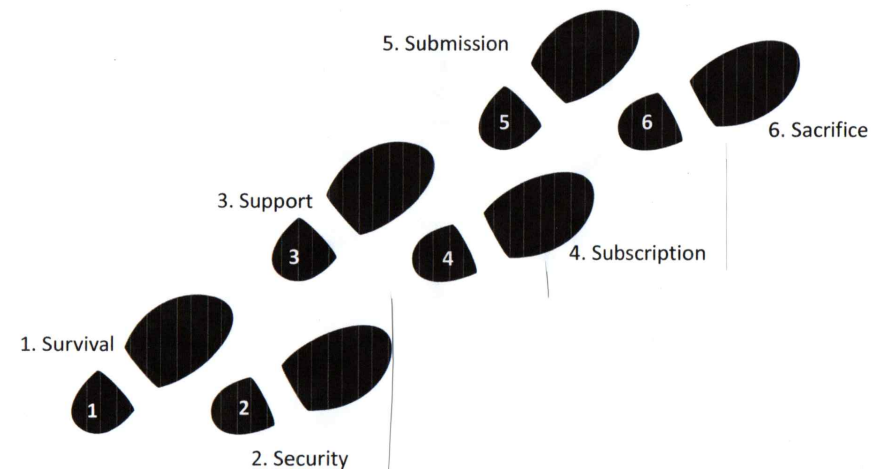
And so it goes on. When the disciples gathered together after the resurrection they locked the door because they were afraid. Thomas would not believe that Jesus had risen until he could put his hands in the wounds. When Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus they talked to him as if the life of Jesus was a wonderful idea which has ended in utter failure.

The truth is that the first disciples are, on that first Easter Day, fearful, and focused on nothing but their own survival. Their transformation 50 days later is utterly remarkable. Far from hiding behind locked doors they now stand up in public squares and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. They risk their reputations; they risk their lives. And it is not long before one of them does die. Stephen, one of the first deacons, is stoned to death. This is followed by widespread persecution and demoralisation of the Christian

community for St Luke tells us that 'everyone, except the apostle, scattered to the country districts of Judaea and Samaria.' (Acts 8:1)

But even those who have been scattered carry on telling the good news of Jesus. They know that they are living dangerously. They know they are risking their lives and they carry on. If, on Easter day they had been focused on survival, they are now willing to offer themselves as a sacrifice. That was their journey, from survival to sacrifice.

This Easter I want to use that picture as a reference point. I want to reflect not only on how the disciples moved from survival to sacrifice but how we might do the same. Now the reality is this is not actually a 50 day journey but one of a lifetime; or at least: that part of my life in which the Christian church has played a part. And in thinking about that journey I want to distinguish four intermediate steps giving us six in total: survival; security; support; subscription; submission; sacrifice. And I would invite you to try to identify which step you are on: It's about self knowledge. It's about knowing how you relate to Jesus Christ, to God, to the church.



So let me unpack those six steps. Let me describe each step on that relationship. And as I do so I invite you to identify yourself. Is the step I am describing one where you have been in the past? Is it where you are now? Or is it a step you have not yet taken?

So let's begin with survival. I need to survive and there is a chance that at some point the church might help in some way. My relationship with the church is that I know it's there if I need it. Now we know that most members of our local community haven't even taken this step. They feel no need to baptise their children. They marry in hotels. Their funerals, or rather the celebrations of a life, are conducted by secular celebrants. But there are some who see this church as a source of occasional help. That is one reason why I think it is so important that this church is open during the day. Because the help that some people need is often quite simply a quiet place to pray or reflect. And if that is the help they need then we should be ready to offer it.

The Second stage is described as security. I treat the church on my own terms and I feel safe and unchallenged. The church is a little bit like a local government office, or a shop and I see myself as a customer buying services. And of course we often present ourselves as the church like that. We offer the services of our clergy to conduct a funeral services and weddings, for a fee. And in doing this we are in competition with many other funeral celebrants or wedding venues. And perhaps it should be no surprise to us that people approach us in the same way with regard to baptism. Hatching, matching and despatching are needed only occasionally but what we offer every week is public worship. When we talk about 'services' we use the same word that is used by hospitals or the railways. It is perfectly possible to be in this church every Sunday and to see yourself as a customer paying for a service. It is perfectly possible that that is the stage that you are at. And if so that's fine.

The third stage is that of support: I need to be long. The work of the church is important to me and so I will support it. Do you see the difference? If I buy a railway ticket, I am happy to pay the proper cost. I have no desire, as a customer to contribute to services I do not use. Supporter is more than a customer. If I support any other, I do so for the most part with no expectation of getting anything back. I have moved beyond being a customer and become a supporter. Perhaps that is your relationship with the church. And that's fine.

The fourth stage is subscription I see myself as a member and I wish to contribute a fair share of the costs whether I receive a service or not. I need to identify with the church. I need to play my part. To continue the image of a charity, I have moved beyond being an occasional supporter to

being committed to the work of that cause. I gave regularly of my time all my money or both I am part of it. Clearly there are many members of this church who identify as being members and commits on that level perhaps that's where do you are. That's fine.

Step five is called submission I now understand that being a disciple means I should put God first in my life. I see a deeper meaning in my life and everything I do is a response to God. It is no longer simply about the needs of the church. The image of a charity now no longer works in the same way. What I do is no longer primarily about the charity. It's about my relationship with God. When I give my time or my money I no longer see it as giving to a cause but as giving to God. This step is quite crucial. The first four steps make perfect sense in secular terms. A person with no faith can be a customer or a supporter or a committed member or a charity. But we are now in a different sphere, a different way of thinking. Perhaps that is the step you have taken and if so that's fine.

But there is one more step: that of sacrifice. Some of Jesus's earliest disciples took this step. They sacrificed that which was most important to them: their lives. Some Christians in our own time have given their lives in martyrdom. But that is not the point. The significance of taking this step is that we give joyfully, and naturally, of what ever is required: money, time, emotional energy. It is, perhaps, summed up in the words of the hymn that you have probably sung in the last week or so:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

So where are you? What step have you taken? I invite you to identify where you are on the journey from Easter to Pentecost. To identify without judgement, without recrimination but also without complacency. It is simply a matter of self knowledge. Of each of us knowing where we are on our journey with Jesus. Where we are is fine - for now. But we might like to move on. To take another step. Because as any user of satnav will know, and as map reader will know it is pointless continuing our journey until you know exactly where you are.