

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 – at least in Britain. 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. But for some people it requires courage to be in church on a Sunday morning. They may have family members who take the mickey out of 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 us.

The most profound witness to the truth 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. What we are witnesses to is that Jesus is alive and that he shares that life with us. We share in his resurrection.

That is good news for us in two ways. First it means that on the last day we, like Jesus himself, will rise from the dead. That is the hope for those who have died before us, for Susan. Geoff and Jean Holroyd. Our prayer today is that they well rest in peace until that day of the resurrection. It is also our own hope: we, with those who have died before us will share in the resurrection.

But the Good News is not only for the last day. It is not just pie in the sky. Jesus Christ is risen and we are risen. The resurrection begins now. That is important for those who are oppressed by grief or anxiety. Early in his ministry Jesus put it like this:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:3-6

These words contain promises for the future but the reassurance is for now: you are blessed. And we are risen from the dead. We do have new life in Christ. Rather like the new born lamb struggling to stand up, we may be rather uncertain of it. But the power of the Christ is working in us, working in me and working in you to make that new life real.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

N Clews
15th April 2018 St James the Great