

**Witnessing to what we have seen** (I John 1.1-2.2; Acts 4.32-35, John 20.19-28)

First of all, an apology to anyone here on the strength of last week's notice sheet. I'm afraid you've got me, and not Bishop David with his inimitable style. So none of you, not least the Bishop himself, will have a chance to stretch your legs during the sermon and I'm sure you will be relieved to know that, with my poor musical skills, I'm not going to attempt to lead you in singing! Last week it was us menfolk who were challenged most; today I hope every single one of us will be challenged to think about our reaction to the first verse of John's first letter. *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.*

Have you been really moved by anything you've heard or seen or touched this last week? Shocked by the constantly increasing total of young lives wasted in London in senseless shootings and stabbings? Distressed by one of those all-too-frequent video clips (with their health warning) about the unimaginable suffering and constant mental anguish in Syria or elsewhere? No doubt we were shocked and distressed once again by the latest horrific poison gas attack. But have our lives been changed? **I doubt it**, unless it has made us even more depressed by the state of the world for which the only antidote is the Good News of Easter.

This photo from the Yorkshire Post this week shows an expert examining and touching one of many giant dinosaur footprints found on the Isle of Skye. I wonder if his life was turned round through contact with something as extraordinary as Britain's oldest sauropod dinosaur. **Somehow I doubt it**, any more than a museum visitor may touch a shiny piece of genuine moon rock and yet come away changed by something so spectacularly other-worldly.

In today's Gospel passage (John 20.19-31) John gives his eye-witness account of Jesus appearing behind locked doors to those disciples who had witnessed the impact of his ministry. Jesus gave them his Peace, showed them his hands and side, and breathed the Holy Spirit over them. But were they initially changed by this out-of-this world appearance? **I doubt it.**

Thomas ranks among the most misunderstood people of the Bible. He's so often called 'Doubting Thomas', implying that this is some kind of fault. I can't let that go unchallenged. In today's passage, Thomas never actually doubts the risen Lord! What Thomas doubts is the word and the witness of the other disciples.

He wasn't there when Jesus appeared. Maybe he'd nipped out to Tesco for a packet of tea bags? Maybe nobody else dared leave their "safe house". But Thomas ventured forth. He was either fearless or foolhardy, or maybe both.

On his return the other disciples told him they have seen the Lord, but for Thomas, something didn't ring true. If they have seen the Lord, why are they still locked up in that room? If they are filled with such joy, why couldn't Thomas read it on their faces? If they have been empowered by the Spirit of God to complete Christ's work on earth, what are they waiting for? For Thomas to return? Surely not, for the disciples showed no emotion, no transformation in their eyes.

So, Thomas said, in so many words, *'I don't believe you.'* Thomas, simple Thomas, loyal Thomas, loving Thomas, straightforward Thomas, down to earth Thomas, direct Thomas, wanted to understand and longed to follow Jesus but needed to know the way. Thomas didn't doubt the Lord; he doubted the word of his friends. Thomas found it highly unlikely that the Lord was risen because he was surrounded by a group of witnesses he did not find credible.

The so-called "Doubting" Thomas had to wait another week for the opportunity to see the nail marks in Jesus' hands and put his finger where the nails were and into Jesus' side (vv.25-26). Then he made the fullest confession of faith to be found anywhere in the Gospels: *"My Lord and my God!"* (v.28).

In our first reading, when John looked back on his time with Jesus, he still feels the excitement of devoting his life to proclaiming the life-changing impact of the ministry of the incarnate Jesus. I wonder if you were reminded of the opening words of John's Gospel (*In the beginning was the Word*) when you heard the beginning of John's first letter: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.* (1 Jn 1.1).

John's declaration is based upon personal experience. These statements are less forceful in English than in the original Greek. John could have written "*what we heard, saw, looked at and touched*" to refer simply to past events witnessed in Palestine many years earlier. But the Greek verbs are all in the Perfect Tense, describing something that happened in the past, but continues to affect us in the present. Fellowship in Christ through the love of God, is at the very heart of John's first letter.

John develops the theme, common in early C2 literature and already familiar from his Gospel, of a way of light and a way of darkness. He reminds us of the purity of God: *God is light; in him there is no darkness at all* (v.5). We can only share fellowship with God if we open our lives to that godly light. This enables John to challenge both a lax moral attitude (v.6) and claims of sinlessness (v.8), both of which may have been issues in the early Church.

Whatever the situation, John is writing not to destroy but to build up, encouraging his readers to be honest about their own weaknesses and to trust fully in Jesus for forgiveness. That applies in the C21 too, both to us as individuals and to church fellowships, especially those that don't really mention sin. John is clear that we will sin, and he is also clear about the solution to our sin: *We have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world* (2.1f).

Our main concern should be whether we are matching up to the standard that John sets. If we let God's light shine into the blackness of our hearts, our sinfulness is exposed and our attempts to deny it are shown up as lies. But truth mustn't just be an abstract concept. It's something that we must act upon.

The Bible tells us how the disciples and early apostles did just that. The Church grew as a result of witnessing to what they had heard, seen, and certainly in Thomas' case, actually touched. Acts 4 tells us how the early believers were united *in heart and mind, sharing everything they had* (v.32). There was no need for food banks since *there was no needy person among them* (v.34). These people not only worshipped differently, but they lived differently. Most importantly, we are told that *with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ* (v.33).

Surely the power of their verbal witness was underpinned by the strength of their selfless actions? It was a community of mutual care of such purity that the world has been trying to ape it ever since. No one could be left in any doubt that their lives – heart, soul and ... pocket, had been touched by Jesus.

There is an ancient saying in the Eastern Church: if you want to know if Jesus is really risen, look around you at the faces at the Easter vigil. Thomas could not read the presence of the risen Christ on the faces of his friends. What would he read on our faces? Look around at one another's faces. Do we look any more transformed than the ten disciples who didn't witness effectively to Thomas? We need to look a credible community, a community that has seen the Lord and been transformed.

Most people in C21 Britain never look at the Bible. If they have one at home, it is probably sidelined as dreary and irrelevant. I had a job to find dusty, neglected-looking books - my wife spring cleans everything so efficiently! – to represent the 4 Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But perhaps there is a 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel too. I put it to you that your life and mine may be the only Gospel many people read. Is it another dreary-looking tome like this? Or is it bright and attractive like this? The Gospel According to You (or Me) may be the only Gospel many people read.

We don't have one of those monstrous fundraising thermometers outside All Saints. But what about an invisible, spiritual thermometer? What evidence is there that our lives, both corporate and individual, have been touched by Jesus?

Is there any evidence for people around town (in the supermarket checkout queue or anywhere else) that we have seen and heard things about Jesus that have really turned our lives around, that He has in some way touched our lives? I think I fail pretty miserably myself, although nearly fifty years after leaving school someone told me how my changed attitude in the Sixth Form was noticed after conversion at a Christian Union house party. I like to think this wasn't just a one-off - only God knows. The crux of the matter is this: is there something in our demeanour, our kindness, or even our face, that gives our allegiance away? Or are we like someone who has experienced contact with moon rock, dinosaur relics or something really special, yet has been completely unchanged by it? Sadly, a brush with the spectacular death-defying power of Jesus can so easily leave us unchanged too.

I'll leave the five Gospels on the steps, so that as we come up to receive Holy Communion, we can all reflect on our effective witness as an attractive Fifth Gospel, the Gospel According to You (or Me). And do look at the title of the shining book representing that 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel (\*\*). Would we have been any better at witnessing our joy to Thomas than the other ten disciples were?

(\*\*) The first cheerful looking book I pulled out of our bookcase happened to be called "*Sunspots*". Or should it be "*SONspots*"?