

öLiving Witnessesö ó 1 Peter 1: 3 ó 9 (JGMC 27/4/14 week after Easter)

öOne thing I do know.ö That perhaps is all today's theme requires of us in order to be the *Living Witnesses* that Christ died for us to become. To act with the *conviction* of the man in John 9 who had been blind from birth, until healed by Jesus. No matter how accomplished this person might have been in living with that disability, to suddenly experience the wondrous gift of sight, to see for the first time the incomparable beauty of all God's creation, must have been truly fantastic, a gut wrenching, incredible experience. By having his eyes made complete, opened by Jesus, he was understandably filled with awe and a sense of incredible blessing, of pure joy.

No doubt also some *confusion*. It must have been a lot to take in at one time.

And all of a sudden here are these men crowding in on his joy; unhappy men, angry men, *religious* men. The John 9 account is a familiar miracle. Jesus had done the healing on the Sabbath ó and the community had many *man-made* rules of what you were allowed to do on the Sabbath, but healing was not one of them! Therefore, many of the Pharisees and even other Jews could not see beyond *that*. Irony of ironies in the midst of a history making event, for, as the healed man himself pointed out, önobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blindö. But those people were not rejoicing with him in the wonder of his healing. Nor were they sympathetic to any hint of confusion from suddenly being able to see for the first time. Obviously their religiousness had missed the piece about the *heart of God*. They were intent only on nipping in the bud this talk of a glorious miracle. So they bombarded him with questions, insults and bullying. But he did not waiver. They did manage to intimidate his parents, who would only go so far as to say: öWe know he is our son í and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him.ö

So, as a lens for our text this morning, let us see what the man from John 9 can show us about being effective, Living Witnesses:

1. He *knew* who *he was*. öI *am* the manö he said, when they tried to say he was not the one who had been blind. Sometimes, after we have been touched by Jesus we prefer to hide who we *used* to be, we minimise the impact Jesus has had on us, for various reasons; but that can rob us of our authenticity as effective witnesses of what Jesus has done for us, and, consequently, as the hymn writer says, what He can do for others.
2. He *knew* *Who it was that had healed him*: öThe man they call *Jesus*ö he answered.
3. He *knew* what *Jesus had done for him*: öHe put mud on my eyes and I washed, *and now I see*.ö
4. He *obeyed* Jesus - *and* he did not hesitate to *tell others* that he had: ö[Jesus] *told* me to go to Siloam and wash. *So I went and washed*, and then I could see.ö
5. He was *unshakable in his testimony*, notwithstanding their unrelenting efforts to intimidate him. öOne thing I do know. *I was blind but now I see*.ö More than that, he readily grasped the core relevance that escaped those supposedly Biblical scholars, and he used their self-righteous mocking to expose their actual ignorance of God.

6. And, very importantly, after he got what he wanted he *did not forget Jesus*. St. John 9: 38 tells us that later when he spoke with Jesus, he said, ‘Lord, I believe’ and he worshipped Him.

There is a story from modern times of a man who described himself as having been a bad lot who drank heavily, sold the furniture to help fund his drinking, even beat his wife. Then he received Christ and all that changed. But when his friends taunted him that surely he hadn’t started believing those stories about turning water into wine and stuff like that, his quick response was: ‘I don’t know if Jesus turned water into wine in Cana, but what I do know is that in my house he has turned beer into furniture!’

I have no doubt that any of us who are Christians, who have been touched by Jesus and call Him Lord, except perhaps for very young children, can also borrow the words of that man from St. John 9, ‘But this I know – once I was blind but now I see.’ Not in the literal sense, but in the new perspective and vision that committing to Christ has given us, as we make room for His Holy Spirit to give us new birth and guide us in seeking to obey God. We can’t avoid it – we do not see Jesus, encounter Him *for Who He is*, and walk away the same as we were before. And that reality has now been even more powerfully multiplied by the transcendent factor of the Cross *plus* the Empty Tomb. Let us never overlook the *supernatural power* of that combination.

As a congregation, we last heard from St. Peter on Good Friday, with his words from Matthew 26, ‘I don’t know the man [Jesus]!’ Completely the opposite of the healed man in John 9. Now we jump ahead to today’s Scripture from 1st Peter. The early chapters of Acts have shown us the new Peter, the courageous, confident, powerful leader and healer, that emerged after the death and Resurrection of Christ and the Gift of the Holy Spirit. And in 1 Peter we see the thoughtful care he takes in choosing each word he uses, in order to help his new audiences understand the true fullness of Who God is, what God has done for us through Christ, and what it *really means* for Christians to love God and neighbour. No more of the ‘speak first and think about what he should say later’ which we sometimes saw in the Gospels! As Christians, we need to learn that care which we too must take in seeking to convey, by our words and actions, the *true nature and fullness* of God, Who is both *absolutely righteous and absolutely loving*. The whole of 1st Peter seems to be greatly admired by Bible commentators and Theologians, apparently from the end of the first century. John Elliott says in the Augsburg Commentary that ‘throughout the ages 1 Peter has represented *one of the highlights of New Testament proclamation*.’ And he cites no less a personage than our Protestant founder, Martin Luther, as ranking it ‘among the true and noblest books of the New Testament – books that show you – in masterly fashion how *faith in Christ* overcomes sin, death and hell, and gives *life, righteousness and salvation*.’ William Barclay had this to say of just 3 verses of our text, that ‘there are few passages in the New Testament where more of the *great fundamental Christian ideas come together*.’

So let us look at some of those ideas. Our opening verse, number 3, is a tremendous place for us to pick up the Sunday after our celebrations of the *core of our Christian faith*, the glorious Resurrection of our living Saviour, living Lord.

Furthermore, it reinforces another *fundamental* point, which Jesus Himself made in John 3, that if we truly believe in Him we become, through God's plan and the mystery of His Spirit, a *person born anew into eternal life with Him*. So our text answers the question of *what* has been done for any of us who number ourselves as a Christian: *we have been "given new birth* into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade ó kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.ö That is a pretty long and complex sentence, in which, as Barclay said, St. Peter managed to pack many of the great fundamental Christian ideas. So perhaps we need to look at it some more, so there is no confusion when as living witnesses we are cross-questioned on what God has done for us.

The main thing we want to be clear on is that *once we believe* in Christ as the *resurrected* Son of God, God Incarnate, and *receive* Him as our Lord and Saviour, we are given that *önew birthö* of verse 3 (or as Peter puts it in verse 23, *öyou have been born again"ö*) *öthrough the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.ö* We receive our salvation, or, as it is often said, we are *ösavedö - there and then*. We must *not* become confused by the NIV terminology used in verse 5 into thinking that our salvation will not be received until the Second Coming of Christ. As we see, verse 5 speaks only of that *ösalvationö* being *öready to be revealedö*, note, *örevealed.ö* *öin the last timeö*. Or as the New Living Translation adds, helpfully, *öready to be revealed on the last day for all to seeö - in other words that is when everyone will see what believers have been saved from*. The NIV Study Bible explains this part of verse 5 by highlighting that the word *ösalvationö* is used in the Bible in all three tenses, and here in reference to the *future* when Christ returns and salvation is *completed* through *glorification*. In fact, if we jump down to the last verse of today's text, verse 9, we see St. Peter himself referring to the *present* process, when he says *öfor you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.ö* St. *Paul* also repeatedly stressed these three stages of salvation, *justification* when we *first believe*, *sanctification* as we continue to *grow in Christ*, as we must, and *glorification* at the *Second Coming of Christ*.

In this regard, we must therefore be careful not to gloss over our *personal responsibility* for the *continuing* process, the *sanctification*, that *our* text also speaks to in verse 5. That it is *öthrough faithö* on our part, that we are *ökept shielded* by God's power in the new creation that we became by our rebirth. In stressing this continuing process, Paul and Peter are basically echoing the words of Christ Himself in John 15, that we must *remain* in Him if He is to remain in us. Our salvation is always as a result of God's love and power ó but the critical element for us is that *we* have to *avail* ourselves of it by *receiving* Christ and *öremainingö* in Him, by *ögrowingö* in Him like the living branches of the vine. And Jesus stressed that in order to continue to grow in Him as a healthy branch bearing the fruit He requires us to bear, *we must obey Him*. And He said *that* basically comes down to, *ölove each other* as I have loved youö. That is an *active* love, *very active*. Jesus *filled* His ministry with tireless examples of what that means; and Saints Peter and Paul as well as the other Apostles and New Testament writers spent much time explaining the many faceted aspects of such love. And despite the richness of our short passage this morning, we must see it as only a very cryptic summary of the rest of First Peter.

And when we examine that, it will help us better understand why the lectionary would use this passage for reflection on the theme, "Living Witnesses".

Before doing so, however, let us look at the rest of our passage. It also answers quite brilliantly the question, *Who did this* for you? "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!" Barclay sees in this a helpful adaptation by the Christian of a traditional Jewish doxology; as this new twist helps us to see God in the more comprehensible image of the always caring and absolutely holy Jesus, "to Whom we can come, through Christ, with childlike confidence." Again, St. Peter is being a *faithful witness* to what Christ Himself said, that if we know Him we know God His Father; and it is only through Christ that we can come to God. It is *essential* that you and I learn from Peter's care in adapting and structuring this phrase. It is simply unacceptable for any of us to sit back and say the Church is under attack in today's Cayman so we have to accept it will decline. The Church, Christianity, was *born* under attack. They killed our Lord Jesus and His following exploded! And it has remained under attack - yet always growing somewhere and in total, because the Holy Spirit is always equipping Peters and Paulas. Therefore, *we too* need to be carefully considering what will make us *effective witnesses* to people today who can be as much a stranger to the truth of God, and as hostile and foreign to the Christian, as the people living alongside the believers to whom Peter was writing. For when we can help people to see *clearly* the combination of caring love for everyone and holiness and purity and power and truth *exemplified in the life of Jesus*, many will indeed be drawn to God's redeeming embrace. And that is God's core objective, for the sake of *all* people. That is something non-believers need to appreciate. God does not need more followers to make *Him* complete; there is no deficiency in God. It is to make *us, people*, complete; it pains Him to see us suffer because people have become separated from Him and we are so quick to settle for the mundane, not even realising the better life that is available to *everyone*. God wants *us* to help people to see that, so they can share in that *abundant life* that Christ came to earth so we could *all* have.

St. Peter, in our passage, was also helping his readers to understand with confidence who *they were*, that other core component of the effective and credible "living witness" that we looked at earlier. In this case, though, that confidence-building needed a two-fold approach. Later on in Chapter 1 Peter reminds them that, just as the man in John 9 had indeed needed healing before he followed Christ and was healed, they had been in need of saving when they followed Christ and were saved. He reminded them of the "evil desires" they had when they were ignorant about Jesus; and of the "empty way of life" from which they had been redeemed once they trusted in Christ. However, in *our text* he is addressing the second aspect of their identity, and reassuring them that they *are indeed* redeemed Children of God, although they may suffer great hardships and grief. Christians still have to counter that popular argument of those who challenge our belief in God.

Peter's letter was being written at a time when persecution of the Christians was increasing. Not only were the Jews who had not accepted Jesus as the Christ continuing to persecute them, but they had also turned the Romans against them. Furthermore, not only were the Christians losing the protection which Roman law had afforded them, but the Roman leadership was becoming increasingly corrupt, morally bankrupt and evil.

Things were going to get horrific for them. And Peter was reassuring them that suffering as a result of human evil *certainly did not* mean they were not under God's protective care for His children. To the contrary, they were suffering *because* they rejected *and did not conform* to the evil of the non-believers. And he was encouraging them to hold fast, to look ahead to the wonderful reward kept for them in heaven which, in the eternity that follows, would make such earthly suffering seem trivial. He was exhorting them to not give in to the temporary protection of *blending in* with the godless living. For in that case the suffering would not be measured in the shortness of a life-span, but would follow them into eternity.

Secondly, he is reassuring them of the *firmness* of their *foundation as witnesses*, even though, unlike Peter himself, they had not *seen* the human Jesus Christ. So he stressed it was the fact of their *belief* in Christ that gave them the new birth which qualified them as true witnesses. And he explained that that *inexpressible* and glorious joy that filled them was without doubt the result of such faith. Once more St. Peter is relating what he had heard directly from Christ, in Jesus' words to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen *and yet have believed*." Those words obviously demonstrate *our* qualification also to be the Christian witness to which Christ called all of us. I began this morning by deliberately not using the familiar terminology that Christ died to *save us*, but that He died *so we could become living witnesses*. For it is essential to look at His *complete* message in effect:

1. if you have believed in me you have been saved,
2. if you have believed in me you will follow me and
3. *if you are* my follower, you must go and be my witnesses, go and teach others, go and make disciples.

And 1 Peter does not gloss over this critical point that what Christ has done for us who have already believed in Him is what He also *yearns to do for those who have not yet believed* or who have strayed away from Him, like the one lost sheep or the prodigal son that Jesus used so vividly to portray the love of God. *A love* that *searches us out* to save us when we have become trapped on some craggy precipice of life, standing precariously on loose, crumbling rocks. A love that waits with yearning heart to welcome us back with open arms when we wake up to the emptiness in which our prodigal life has left us. To the contrary, 1 Peter tells Christians in 1:13 to "prepare your minds for *action*!" And in 2:9 that others "stumble because they do not obey God's word," "But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, **you** can *show others* the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light."

And the rest of 1 Peter is a treasury of reminders of how we should live as Christians, such good lives that even those who speak out against, ridicule and accuse Christians will *see our deeds are good* and *glorify God*. And it outlines how our love should help in correcting all the social issues that are even now undermining our society. For undoubtedly we still need to *promote* those things that Peter addressed:

1. proper mutual respect and support between the young and the older generations;

2. loving, faithful and mutually empowering family relationships, amongst spouses, parents and children;
3. the mutuality of the interest between employer and employee, as we continue here to grapple with the issue of a fair day's work for a living wage, and integrity in regard to training, pensions and medical benefits that would enhance the welfare of employees, *and* increase productivity for the employer;
4. the relationship between the governed and those who govern, with laws that promote a just society and people who obey the laws;
5. and always living for Christ and re-presenting His actively caring love for helping make whole those with one need or another.

As my mind just skims over the range of those types of issues and needs crying out in our community, I certainly understand St. Peter's call to get into *action*! But I also thank God for what we already do as a Church to *witness* to the *goodness of God* and help lead people to His *salvation*, our programmes to help parents in raising up, and educating, their children better, to bring joy to our senior citizens, to comfort and counsel the emotionally distressed, our food assistance programmes here and abroad, and so on. And for the witness of so many of our people individually, in so many of these areas. Just a few nights ago I was reminded of this as two United Church members, one from our own congregation, led the presentation on the new policies for ensuring persons with disabilities have the opportunity to participate fully in our society, while another John Gray faithful made a very important contribution from the audience. Really, there should be no one more concerned than the Christian to help right any injustices for persons with disabilities. It's in our DNA! Jesus did not pass by the blind man left to sit by the road and beg. Peter did not pass by the lame man left to beg at the temple gates.

There really is no limitation on the opportunities, *and the need*, to be living witnesses for the God whose caring love knows no bounds. Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation issued last November and entitled *öThe Joy of the Gospelö*, exhorts his people, *öLet us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm!ö* He says they must really know and care about what is happening in the lives of the people in their communities. He states that *öTrue faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness.ö* I like that! We too must re-examine *our 'self-giving'* - in all the ways that means.

Last Sunday we once again *rejoiced* in front of the images of the empty tomb and the empty Cross, *relieved* that we had made the choice to *receive* Christ and be gathered into the *öwonderful lightö* and *öliving hopeö* of God's *redeemed*. Now today, our text calls on us to not just sit back and luxuriate in that great gift. For we have been *chosen* as *witnesses* to *show* the goodness of God to others, whom God continues to call out of the darkness into that great *öinheritance that can never perish, spoil or fadeö*. He calls *us* to *action*! *How* will you obey? Amen.