

**SERMON DELIVERED BY THE RT. REV. ROBERT THOMPSON
SUFFRAGAN BISHOP, KINGSTON
SYNOD EUCHARIST, Thursday, April 24, 2014**

Sermon text: Luke 24: 38-39, 46-48

“Jesus said to them, why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; ...And He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’”

One of the most peculiar things about Luke’s Resurrection story is the way Jesus identifies himself to his friends. “Look at my feet”, he says to his frightened, doubtful and despairing disciples. Jesus wanted them to see the wounds and it was important for the disciples to look, because they had never wanted to do this before. They ran away from facing up to the real cost of discipleship.

Some two thousand years after the disciples were challenged to look at the wounded body of Christ and after 350 years of Anglican witness in Jamaica, we too are called to look at the wounds on the Body of Christ - his Church. Yes - we must look at the wounds; we must pay close attention to our ageing and declining congregations. We must pay attention but we must never allow our wounds to define us. If we do we will not be able to engage the second part of our Gospel text, which is to witness to the Easter Joy. We live in an age and at a time when there is far more emphasis being placed on freedom and very little on practice and discipline. It is also an age where committed church-going struggles against the weight of secularisation, consumerism and individualism.

Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity After Religion*, observed that “Roughly 44 percent of Americans have left their childhood faith in favour of another denomination or religion or by dropping any religious affiliation at all”.

She further wrote; Fifty years ago, people were born into a religion . a faith often passed down through many generations . and tended to stay with their childhood church. Inherited faith was an important dimension of personal identity, -we have always been and will always remain Anglicans/Episcopalians, Catholics or Jews- no longer carries the swing. The connection between identity and family tradition is unravelling as people choose their own spiritual paths, embracing faiths that may once have been outside the realm of possibility for their ancestors.

This is the world to which we must witness today. A world where no one idea holds any claim to truth over the other. What this means is that Christians - and Anglicans in particular - can no longer take the church and what it represents for granted. Its claims and position in society are no longer as secure as they once were. There is however no need to despair. Despite the fact that we have lost something of the earlier power to explain to the world the redemptive message of Jesus Christ in terms that are readily accessible, we still possess opportunities to witness to the liberating presence of Jesus Christ. As Bishop Stephen Cottrell reminds us in his book, *Catholic Evangelism*: It is the first time for a long time that we have been in a situation like this, but it is not the very first time+. Our multi-faith, pluralist society has some interesting similarities with the world of the Roman Empire into which the Christian Faith was born. Then, the Christian faith had to jostle alongside many other philosophies and religions. In the end it won the day+ (pg.8). On a whole we are not winning the battle. Yet all of these challenges present exciting opportunities for recalibrating the way we engage the society with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Evangelism was effective in the early years of the Christian movement because it was bound up with being a church in mission. In those first centuries the church had either to be a missionary church or not at all. Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, we are at that very place once again and our message will not be heard, our ministry will not be received, our values will not survive, unless we grasp the challenge of mission and evangelization with both hands. Archbishop John Sentamu puts it well, when he said recently in relation to the Church of England **"we must either Evangelise or fossilise"**.

Cottrell argues that Christianity won the day for three distinctive reasons:

- The credibility and intellectual integrity of the faith that was being shared;
- The ability of faith to speak to the culture in ways that could be heard
- The evidence in people's lives for the transforming energy of the gospel.

I invite you to reflect very briefly on **these three** points as we contemplate the first two marks of mission,

- to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, and
- to nurture new believers in faith.

When the work of evangelism - making known the gospel of Jesus Christ - is woven tightly together with sound reasoning, Christian witness and nurture in the lived experience of the Christian life, the results are surprisingly wonderful.

So let me say first of all that many members of our congregations are faithful Christians, insofar as they attend church regularly, but they have not grown into that maturity of faith whereby they feel able to live the Christian life Monday to Saturday.

Firstly - to achieve this, we will need a theologically literate church. While it is true that a few keener members of our congregations have availed themselves to undertake some sort of theological study, the vast majority have only a slender grasp on the intellectual credibility of the Christian faith. We have allowed the truth about God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, to become a private option. No wonder so few have the confidence to speak about their faith as public truth, or as the lived experience of God that informs all that matters in life. The scriptures say that we should all be able to give a reason for the hope that is within us (1st Peter 3:15). It is in the local congregation that people should be learning about their faith and exploring its relevance for life.

The evangelising church must never be satisfied with anything less than this, which goes way beyond the standard six-to-ten-week confirmation course, which is the structure for initiation used in many of our churches. I believe that a major factor to becoming a witnessing church is this equipping of the people of God to be able to articulate their faith in ways that will allow them to dig deep into the social conditions. Only then will they convince others to make the same journey.

Secondly, when the church becomes a place where people's questions and doubts are addressed it will also become a place where trust can develop and one's journey in faith begins. This was echoed in the Emmaus Road story. After Jesus asked the two companions what they are discussing, they begin a conversation about how the Messiah was destined to suffer and die. When they arrived at Emmaus, evening is falling and Jesus makes as if to go on. "Stay with us," they say (Luke 24:29). These words are very significant. At this moment in the story they still don't know that it is Jesus they are talking to, and yet they ask him to stay with them. Why? His words had intrigue, challenge and appeal. What could be more natural than to invite him to supper?

We also need to be open to these moments of tentative response. Even if people have not yet made all the connections, and not yet made a real response to God, they have discovered enough to know that the church cares for them, takes them seriously and values their questions.

Finally, the evidence of a witnessing church is seen through the faithful stewardship of the gospel. The catechism [BCP page 403 #83] puts it this way: "God the Father calls all His people to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring others to a knowledge of Him. You and I will never succeed in fulfilling this call except through prayer and through the life we lead, seeking to ensure that our standards and values reflect the values and standards of the gospel. So let us ask ourselves: is my life a blessing to those around me? To what extent do people meet Christ when they meet me? These are hard questions, but facing up to them is vital if we are to allow the faith we celebrate on Sunday to shape the lives we lead beyond the church door. Once people have discovered that we go to church, whether we like it or not they will be evaluating the church and the gospel on the evidence of our lives. And if our lives are indistinguishable from everybody else's, then no wonder our evangelism is ineffective."

This does not mean we are supposed to be better than everybody else. What really marks out a Christian life is the generosity, tolerance and grace that flow from a life that knows something of God's love for us.

It is our need of God, and his loving mercy to us, that enables us to be more merciful, more humble, more generous and more forgiving with those around us. In this way, more than any other, we witness to Christ.

The most effective form of evangelism is the Christ-like witness of ordinary Christian people in their ordinary daily lives. I believe this is the evangelism we all dream about, and it can happen when the congregation is rooted in Jesus Christ and our lives become translucent of the Gospel.

CONCLUSION

As someone said; ~~We~~ we are welcoming people into relationship with God as citizens of God's Kingdom; not recruiting members to a cash-strapped organisation+. If survival and ambition are our motives for evangelism then we are bound to fail. Getting it right the first time around is important. And we get it right only when we can acknowledge, that the work of evangelism is the work of God. We need humility in our evangelism and we need to be stewards of the gospel for the present generation. We do it out of faithfulness to the Lord's command to make disciples. It is for God's vision of a renewed humanity and a renewed creation . that we evangelise.

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