

Easter Day 10.15am, 21 April 2019

Witnesses

They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up and allowed him to appear... to us who were chosen by God as witnesses...

The words of Peter to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household. This was the first time Peter shared the gospel with Gentiles, following a vision telling him to do so, and immediately the Holy Spirit came upon them all, they believed and were baptised.

Peter's testimony, as an eye witness of Jesus' death and resurrection, was empowered by God's Spirit to bring new life to Cornelius and all his household.

I want to think on this glorious morning about that word WITNESS, and what it means to *be* a witness and to *bear* witness.

To be a witness, firstly, is a **public** thing. You may have been a witness to a marriage, or a will, or another legal document. Your signature stands as confirmation that what is written is true.

You may have been a witness in a court case, when you swear that what you say is true- the whole truth and nothing but the truth, as we all know from films and TV if not our own experience.

You may have witnessed an accident, or more likely these days have taken photos or film footage of it, as in the tragic shooting of Lyra McKee in Derry on Good Friday, or those who were in Paris and recorded the fire at Notre Dame for all the world to see.

In our study of history, objects stand witness to events and timescales, from the ruins of an abbey to the remains of a Roman rabbit. Without their witness, in stone or bone, we would not know all that they can teach us.

In today's insatiable search for news, for evidence, for truth in every part of our lives, we need **witnesses**.

Throughout the Bible it is not only people but the whole created order which bears witness to who God is. The valleys sing with joy, the waterfalls thunder God's praises, the trees clap their hands.

For many of us, the beauty of creation speaks at a deep level about the love of God for all that he has made, and of our place within it. All creation stands witness to God's glory, as the poet famously said:

*The earth is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out like shining from shook foil...*

To be a witness is public. At the licensing service just 10 days ago we heard the story of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus and told all her friends and neighbours about him. She was a witness to what she had seen and heard and others took up her invitation to 'Come and see'.

Last week we read of the crowd on Palm Sunday, witnesses to Jesus, shouting 'Hosanna' as he rode past into Jerusalem. And when ordered to stop them, Jesus replied that if they were silent, the very stones along the road would cry out, and bear witness to him.

You and I would not be gathered here this morning, to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the eternal hope and promise which it brings, without witnesses, public witnesses, not holding on to the good news but sharing it.

It was always meant to be thus.

God's salvation plan depended, from the beginning on those who would be witnesses.

Public witness and witnesses to the **Promise** of God.

Not scientifically proven, not legally binding, but witnesses whose hearts and lives demonstrated and shared the promise:

Mary bore witness and praised God as she claimed the promise she had received, before any evidence of its fulfilment:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour...

Elizabeth's baby John leaps in her womb in witness to the coming of the promised Christ child.

Shepherds and eastern astronomers are witnesses, each proving the truth of the promises they have received, from angels and a guiding star.

And so it continues, witnesses who see, in Jesus, the Promise of God fulfilled, until a Roman centurion witnesses Jesus' death and praises God.

So here we are, in the garden with Mary, early in the morning, earlier even perhaps than those of us who met here first thing today.

She came to weep but she left a witness.

A witness first to the open tomb and the missing body.

So she did what a woman had to do, fetching the men to corroborate, to give legal standing to her witness statement.

They came, saw for themselves and went home.

But Mary couldn't leave.

For hope was rising within her, its radiance echoing the first glimmers of dawn in the east, even in the midst of confusion and loss. So Mary stooped to look into the tomb and there were the angels, witnessing to the truth of the great promise fulfilled.

That could have been enough, and we would still have sufficient evidence, still have witnesses to an empty tomb and an impressive cast of people who saw him alive. We would still have proof, enough to stand up in any court in history.

But what John gives us in his account is deeper still.

As Mary hears her name she knows it is true, not just that Jesus has risen but that she is loved and known, forgiven and free.

She has seen the Lord,

seen and believed,

seen and been sent by him

to be the first witness to the most significant event in history.

Mary becomes a witness, heart and soul, mind and spirit, serving her Lord. She can do, and be, nothing else.

And us? As we see and believe afresh this morning, will we allow him to touch us at such a deep level that we too are sent?

That we too become witnesses for Christ in all we do and in who we are?

Lest we feel inadequate, let's remember that Jesus chose Mary as his first witness to his resurrection, Mary whose gender and reputation would have ruled her out of any rational selection process.

Then he chose disciples who had failed him and fled, starting with Peter. They all remind us that those who are forgiven much, love much, and that in loving Christ we become his witnesses, as his Spirit bears witness to our spirits and fills us with his love.

As we come and receive Christ in the Communion today, or as we pray quietly or sing joyfully, we respond once more to Jesus who is alive, and to the truth of his resurrection, its power and glory.

I'd like to end with some words and a prayer by Ruth Etchells, which you may wish to echo for yourself as I read them slowly now:

O Love that defeated darkness and death,
for all humanity, for all creation...

And for me...

In awed astonishment I gaze at you.

Can death truly die?

O loving and radiant Lord, let me, this twenty-first century day,
in wondering joy enter again into our Easter inheritance,
and claim for this world and all that it inhabit,
the end of despair and the certainties of new life.

And in that faith, Lord, make me ever more loving and giving, with the love that is
your gift and our guarantor. Amen.