

Witnessing to Christ

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A sermon given on Sunday 21 May 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **1 Peter 3:13-22**, John 14:15-21 (Year A, 6th Sunday of Easter)

Introduction:

Three preachers are in a boat far from land. As they talk, they start confessing their shortcomings to one another. The first one says, "I have a problem with alcohol. I like to take to the bottle sometimes." The second one says "Well, I have a problem with lust. I desire every woman I see." The third preacher has been sitting quietly listening, until the other 2 ask him, "Well, aren't you going to tell us what your besetting sin is?" "I have a problem with gossip", says the third, "Just wait till I get back to the shore!"

I wonder if you have any skeletons in the cupboard? ...

Witnessing to Christ

People are quick to point out hypocrisy. You've probably heard people say "the church is full of hypocrites". If you claim to be a Christian or go to church, people will look at you to see whether the way you live matches what you say you believe. People are not impressed when a driver cuts them up and they then notice a sticker on the back of their car that reads "Don't follow me, follow Jesus" or some such Christian slogan. What you say you believe on Sunday has to match the way you live the rest of the week. How you behave in an argument, or when you've had a few drinks, speaks volumes about the sort of person you are inside.

I gave this sermon the title "Witnessing to Christ" and realised later that this probably wouldn't be the most appealing title! It may be largely our British culture, reinforced by our Church of England reserve, but most of us probably aren't looking out for opportunities to share our faith with others. We have a sense that religion and faith are private matters. It's OK to discuss politics in public, and it's fine to discuss religion if you're criticising someone else's, but how confident would you feel if the conversation became more personal and someone said, "So what do *you* think about God?"

Today's reading from 1 Peter identifies the fact that there are two ways of being a witness to Christ – the way we live and what we say. Both are important. And looking at it another way, most of us are sensitive to what other people think about us, and the way people react to us has a big influence on how we think about ourselves. One reason we may feel uncomfortable about the concept of being a witness to Christ is that we worry whether we are really up to the title of Christian. It goes to the root of our sense of our own identity.

The bigger picture

Actually, the writer of 1 Peter realises this, which is why he begins his letter with a celebration of what God has done for us.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (*1 Peter 1:3-5*)

Later in chapter 1 Peter reminds us that

...you know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. (*1 Peter 1:18-20*).

In last week's reading, Peter spoke of Christians as "living stones", which are being built into a spiritual temple, and said that as members of the church we are

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (2:9)

So it's not about us at all – it's all about what God has done. Describing yourself as a Christian is not saying, "Look at what a good person I am", but humbly acknowledging what God has done for you, and what a privilege it is that God has chosen you and called you to be part of his people and to be a disciple of Christ.

In other words, being a Christian is about responding to the grace of God, letting Jesus save you through his blood shed on the cross, the blood which we are reminded of each Sunday when we come to this table to receive the bread and wine.

Once you realise how much God loves you, and what an amazing privilege it is to be a Christian, that changes the way you look at your life, your relationships with other people and the way you can impact the world for good.

Embracing our calling

None of us are perfect. God knows we all need a bit of restoration work to be done on us. One of my favourite poster captions says "Be patient: God isn't finished with me yet". I am aware of many faults in myself, and the further I go on in my ministry, the more weaknesses I become aware of – and no doubt you do too!

So Peter reminds us of our baptism:

And baptism ... now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (3:21).

Just as Jesus' death washed us from our sins, so by his resurrection we are brought to a new birth, free to live the life God intends for us to live. In chapters 2 and 3 (the bits we've not heard in our readings), Peter gives his readers instructions for how they could live out this principle in different situations of life and in relationships in the church. Understanding the context helps us to make sense of how Peter addresses the behaviour of Christians who are household slaves, and of wives and husbands towards each other.

Given what God has done for us, Peter appeals for a consistent lifestyle:

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. (3:13-16)

Peter is writing to Christians who are feeling the tension between their faith and their position in the world. He reminds them that we are "exiles and strangers" in this world. Now we belong to God, we are different from people who don't belong to God, and by our good influence we can help others to discover God's love and purpose for their lives too.

So we need to *behave* like people who belong to God. Don't underestimate the power that your witness can have on others. And by "your witness" I mean the way we behave under pressure, the trouble we take to put things right when there has been a misunderstanding or a disagreement between us and another person, the care we take to be scrupulously honest in financial matters, the time we spend with someone who needs a sympathetic listening ear.

Becoming more Christlike happens when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives, and that has a direct relationship with the time we spend in reflective prayer. One practical thing we can do is to spend a few moments at the end of each day reflecting prayerfully on what has happened in our

lives that day – the good things that happened and the things that didn't go so well, and what we can learn from those. Sometimes part of that reflection may lead to a prayer of confession and asking God to give us grace to handle such situations better in future, or to put right things that have gone wrong. But don't forget that God still loves you, however “successful” you think you are as a Christian. Everything that was written in the earlier part of 1 Peter still holds true – Christ died for you, God has chosen and called you, and has saved a place for you in heaven, and you are still a member of his royal priesthood and his holy people.

Saying it in words

In verses 15-16 Peter writes that we *should always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us* – in other words, be willing to say that we are Christians, and why that is important to us. But we are to *do it with gentleness and reverence* – after all, we are not Christians because we are good people, but because we are forgiven sinners. You may not know the answers to every theological question (I certainly don't!) but you have a testimony about the difference that God has made in your life. It would be a useful exercise to sit down when you get home and write a few sentences under the heading *The difference God has made in my life*. Putting it into words in private will help you to put it into words to another person.

Conclusion

Do you have a clear conscience? Are there secret failings you wouldn't want others to know? What impression of Christianity do you give to other people? Would they guess you are a Christian by the way you talk and behave?

The good news is that God has called us, saved us and forgiven us as today's communion reminds us. He has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. God calls us to live as children of the light, so that through us God's light may shine into the lives of others, and bring hope to the world.

Let us take now a few moments of reflection. You may like to use the questions on the slip of paper you were given when you came in, both now and when you get home today.

Questions for reflection

1. What difference has God made in my life?
2. How does belief in God and Jesus Christ influence the way I think about the purpose of my life, and the way I prioritise my use of time and money?
3. Which people or situations have I influenced for good in the past month? In what ways might God have used my behaviour or words to bring blessing to others?
4. Are there any weaknesses, bad habits or frequent sins that let me down as a witness for Christ? What am I going to do about them? Who could help me with this?