

Give me the evidence

Sunday 26 April 2009

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

1 Peter 1:3-9

Psalm 100

John 20:24-31

Sermon & Vicar's APCM Report

The resurrection was, in many ways, a *quiet* affair:

- no sounding trumpets as the stone was rolled away
- no angelic fly-past
- no signs and wonders in the heavens
- no crowds to cheer the risen Lord
- no choir to sing the Hallelujah Chorus

The most stupendous event in the history of humanity ... the very moment on which the whole of history turns ... all took place outside the city walls of an obscure outpost of the Roman Empire, and among a disorganised rabble of frightened men and women who were too caught up in their grief and confusion to realise what was going on.

The power of God was released in that stone tomb ... death was rolled backwards, and nothing would ever be the same again ... and later that same day, Jesus appeared to his disciples ... but Thomas, because he was absent at the time, was unconvinced!:

"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

How do you feel about Thomas? History has labelled him a little unfairly, it seems to me ... people use his name as a label for those who are hard to convince:

"Oh, you're just a doubting Thomas, you are!"

But surely we ought to sympathise with him. He could not allow himself to believe what he had not seen with his own eyes. I guess that having believed in Jesus and then losing him traumatically, he could not face the possibility of being disappointed again.

Some would call it rotten luck to be the only one who was out when Jesus first called ... but since we don't really believe in luck, we must assume that this was God's purpose.

Thomas is no different to many people today, who will not believe – and think they cannot believe – something which they cannot prove themselves to be true. Thomas is the archetypal pragmatist – he just needed evidence!

We see something of the loving patience and gracious understanding of Jesus in his response to Thomas. A week after Jesus' first appearance to the disciples in the house in Jerusalem, he came to them again ... this time, with Thomas present ... and showed

him exactly what he needed to see.

Thomas saw the nail marks in Jesus' hands, and the wound in his side from the soldier's spear ... and he was convinced. When Thomas finally believed, his response was:

"My Lord and my God!" .

But notice what Jesus said of those of us who believe without having seen:

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

So we are yet more blessed! John records that such miracles and signs as Jesus did were for a reason – that we may believe - *"and that by believing (we) may have life in his name."*

In 1 Peter 1, Peter reminds the Christians, who have by now been scattered far and wide, just how much God has done for them:

- great mercy
- new birth
- living hope
- eternal inheritance

It all adds up to one thing – salvation. The whole mission and ministry of Jesus is summed up in that aim. If we believe in him and love him, even though we have not seen him, we will know the glorious joy that comes from the assurance that we are truly his.

God works in his Church by his Holy Spirit, to build us up and the enable us to do his work until Jesus comes again. As we submit ourselves to his purpose, we will know the blessing of his presence in our lives, and the privilege of being in his service.

So ... as we look back over this last year, what evidence do we see of the Risen Lord Jesus among us and at work in our Church, and through our Church?

The APCM is traditionally a time for saying 'Thank You' to many people ... and I do want to thank all those who are actively involved in the Ministry and Mission of St Philip's:

- the Church Wardens, who are such a personal support and encouragement, and do much more behind the scenes than many will ever know.
- the members of the PCC, who help to direct the life of the Church.
- the MLT members, who each take responsibility for various aspects of Church life.
- the paid staff, Jackie and Sarah.
- the Deputy Wardens, who do so much practical stuff - Thanks to Mark, stepping down.
- the Children's and Youth Work team – so often the unsung heroes of Church life.
- the Home Group Leaders, who nurture, teach and pray for members of their groups.
- the sidesmen, coffee team, flower arrangers, work day helpers, & Philippian collaters.
- the Music Group, the Scripture readers, intercessors and Prayer Ministry Team.

I'm sorry if I've forgotten anyone!

All these people play a vital role in the life of the Church, and without them nothing

much would happen ... but there is a sense in which it is *not about them* – not about *us* - but only about Jesus. What really matters is not what *we* have done, but what *God* has done.

So ... will you take a moment or two at each of the tables to identify what God has done for us over this last year ... evidence that God has been at work here ... perhaps to identify some highlights since our last APCM ... and to write them down on the appropriate sheet of paper. Then we will collect them up – they will be reviewed by the PCC / MLT.

COLLECT EVIDENCE SHEETS: 1

Peter reminds us of the hope we have in the resurrection of Jesus ... which is the guarantee, after all, of our own resurrection. This is the good news ... when he comes, we shall be like him!

But until that day, God has called us together and put us in this place in order to serve him here. He has given us a Ministry to share in, and a Mission to fulfil. In short, we are to build one-another up in faith, to reach out to others in love, and to proclaim the Good News so that people may come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

But what in particular is God calling us to do? As we look to the future, what are we going to be asking the Risen Lord Jesus to do among us and through us? ... and are we expectant that God will be at work here?

So ... will you take a moment or two at each of the tables to share your Hopes and Dreams. We're not trying to dictate to God ... simply to ask him to guide our imaginations as we look to the year ahead. ... and to write our thoughts down on the appropriate sheet of paper. Then we will collect these up to.

COLLECT HOPES AND DREAMS SHEETS: 2

Of course, if we are praying that God will be at work here at St Philip's and in our community, we need to ask ourselves how willing we are to stand up and be counted. Our praying won't count for much unless we are ready to be part of the answer to our own prayers. Will we make ourselves available for God's mission to our parish and beyond?

Peter, in his letter, reminds us that it will not all be plain sailing. He doesn't shrink from the fact that there is a price to pay for doing God's will. We may suffer:

- grief
- trials
- faith-testing

Sometimes there are struggles as we try to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Devil will do his best to frustrate whatever we seek to do in Jesus' name ... our faith will be tested, and we may face setbacks and disappointments.

There will be times when we find it hard to get along with our fellow Christians. There will be times when we have doubts about our faith. There will even be times when we feel like giving up.

But we are not promised an easy life. There is no guarantee that all will go well for us.

God never said "Once you become a Christian all your troubles are over." What Jesus did say was "I will be with you."

So ... will you take a moment or two at each of the tables to consider the challenges we face as a Church ... and to write our thoughts down on the appropriate sheet of paper? Then we will collect them up.

COLLECT CHALLENGES SHEETS: 3

Do pray for the members of the PCC as they face up to these challenges ... and for the members of the MLT as we pray for God's guidance in responding to the needs and opportunities before us. Prayer for our preachers, our service leaders, and the whole people of God here.

The promises of God are for his presence with us here and now, in the midst of all the good and the bad which we encounter in our daily lives ... and for eternity in his nearer presence 'when Jesus Christ is revealed'. We need to remember that even in the hard times, God is faithful. He will never leave us, and he will never let us down.

So, as we look to the coming year, what part will you play in the Ministry and Mission of God at St Philip's?:

- in worship
- in pastoral care
- in outreach
- in practical work
- in mission
- in social action
- in prayer
- in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ

The work of the Church is to engage in the work of God. In the words of Bishop Brian on the service when the new parish was launched:

"To look for where God is at work, and join in."

We all have a part to play.

Remember the Mission statement which sets out our purpose (**OHT**):

"St Philip's the Evangelist, Sherwood ... living and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit."

Living the Good News ... and Sharing the Good News ... in grateful thanks and with joyful hearts, because we know who we are in Jesus.

Unlike Thomas, we cannot put our fingers into the nail marks in Jesus' hands, or place our hand in the wound in his side ... but as Jesus told Thomas:

"Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe."

(End by showing PCC Cartoon ... **OHT**)

Response Sheets handed out to groups to work on at pauses in sermon:

1. Evidence that God has been at work here ... identify some highlights since our last

APCM.

2. Hopes and Dreams ... what is God calling us to do? What will we ask the Risen Lord Jesus to do among us and through us?
3. Challenges we face as a Church ... what do we need to seek God's help with in the year ahead?