

Sermon Luke 24: 36b-48

Do not be afraid

Peace be with you. I wasn't sure whether or not this would elicit a knee jerk reaction of 'and also with you' this morning. But that is how Jesus greeted his disciples when he met the group after the resurrection. Peace be with you.

The disciples were wary and scared, and little wonder. In the space of a few days they had seen their leader, Jesus, the man they looked up to, crucified. Then in what must have seemed like a cruel trick they have found that his tomb is empty. And finally, the two who had set out for Emmaus have just come rushing back, despite it now being late, full of excitement at having seen Jesus on the road. Who could not be feeling confused and fragile? Frightened at how the Romans and the Jewish authorities would react.

What a relief it must have been to hear those words! Peace be with you or as I think I would alternatively word it – do not be afraid. Here is Jesus standing among them not as a ghost but as a real physical presence. Perhaps the relief was short lived as they realised what task had been set before them, to tell others what they had witnessed.

And so the Easter story finishes, except that this is no way the end, but rather the beginning of the rest of the story. A few years ago I stood up in church and confidently announced that the reading that day was from the first book of Acts. I hoped that my goof had gone unnoticed but after the service Nick Ball gave me some stick about it. That led to an interesting discussion which concluded in us agreeing that there were potentially further books of Acts, and that we were in effect still living them. Because the story continues.

But for the story to continue people still need to tell it. To tell it both in its original form and in a way that makes more sense to people living in the modern world. For those of us brought up on daily school assembly including a Bible reading and a traditional hymn it can be hard to remember that this is not the pattern in school nowadays. I always have a quiet chuckle when I think of some of the conversations that must have taken place when the first English Bible translations were available. 'There is nothing wrong with having the Bible in Latin: we know the stories anyway', 'Does this mean that women will be reading it?'

The ways of telling and the language may change but the message remains the same. Don't be afraid but share the resurrection story. Don't be afraid to tell the resurrection story.

21st century Britain is not somewhere that Christians are persecuted but that doesn't mean that people are not embarrassed to say what they believe, or to feel that they are different in an uncomfortable sort of a way. Not everybody feels confident in joining the walk of witness – well you never know who you may meet. And at every stop we all shout

'It's Friday but Sunday is coming' hardly conventional behaviour. People may feel that their own knowledge is not good enough for it to be shared. Anyone who joined the parish's Lent conversations will attest that we have many different views, different ways of seeing the same circumstances and that this is healthy rather than somehow bad. But the first time of going to something like that can be scary because, somehow, we imagine that everyone else knows so much more than we do, and have opinions that are more valuable.

Be at peace, do not be afraid. Jesus stood among his disciples with that message, and although he is not standing here now, that message has not changed. When we feel inadequate in taking the story forward, in sharing it directly or through our actions and relationships with others we can take comfort in that. We don't need to be teachers to teach, professional caterers to make a cup of tea, or pastoral specialists to lend a sympathetic ear. We are all experts in being Christian, we know how our relationship with God feels and that is what others will value sharing.

This month at Messy Church we have a number of people coming to help for the first time. I'm not saying they have had their arms twisted but hopefully we have asked them in such a way that they feel comfortable in what we are asking of them. If we have a typical turn out there will be 100 adults and children, some of whose experience of the Christian story is sketchy or distant, and we have the opportunity to share God's love with them. Almost all of them will be younger than the team who are running the morning which makes it so important. For the story to continue we need to share it with younger generations, to show them the excitement that we can feel as we worship together and talk about God's love.

None of us should be held back from sharing the resurrection story by a fear of not being good enough to share, or a fear that we will be laughed at. We need to get on with our task of living the later books of Acts, even though they may never be written down.

I wanted to finish by telling you of something brilliant that happened last Monday evening. I went as I often do help with the informal interviewing of prospective scout leaders and helpers. When I arrived, I was greeted by my interviewing colleague not with a conventional 'Good evening', but with 'It's Friday but Sunday is coming'. Witness is not confined to church.