

AN EASTER DAY WORD

The First Preachers

Fear and death flow about their feet
as the first preachers plod
towards the finality of stone and grave.

The angels speak their peace and hope rises.
A gardener, who is not a gardener, speaks a name,
and their re-cognition turns fear into hope;
finality into resurrection.

Before the sun is up, the tomb is empty,
and they flee with terror and joy.
Then heavy of breath and alight with love
their first fear fuelled sermon begins:

Christ is risen.

Easter joy begins in the grip of chaos and fear.
Yet it is hope that rises in the darkness before the dawn.
The first sermons whisper on the wind:

He is risen indeed!

Reflection from Spill the Beans, Issue 34

We make a big mistake if we try to imagine that those men and women who founded the Church were somehow some special breed of people. We might be tempted to think that they were special as we know that it must have been very difficult and often dangerous to share the good news of the gospel in a society and times that were hostile to it. After all, it was the same society that had crucified Jesus.

We know also that many of these early followers of Jesus and founders of the Church faced great persecution, and many became martyrs for refusing to bow down to the Emperor because they were followers of Christ. Some, like Peter, were themselves crucified, and others fed to the wild beasts in the Roman arenas or made to fight gladiators, but yet a faithful remnant always survived and kept on evangelising and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen reconciling the world to God.

How did they do it? Why did they do it?

For when we read the Bible, we can see that they were men and women with all too real strengths and weaknesses, gifts and faults, ups and downs, successes and failures, but, and it's a big but, they also had witnessed and become part of a most extraordinary event. For they had witnessed Jesus' excruciating, humiliating and very public execution by the Romans, and they had seen that he was truly dead. They had witnessed his body being placed in a tomb. But, and it's a very big but, they had also been absolutely astounded when he appeared alive and vibrant among them.

To begin with many of them had struggled to really comprehend that he had been raised from the dead. But over time and after the risen Christ had had many encounters with them, they came to believe that it was indeed true that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And that in his conquering of death the possibility of a new relationship with God had become possible.

This was an extraordinary discovery! A discovery that excited them and gave them hope and renewed life, but one that they did not feel able to share because they were still scared stiff that if they did anything that would draw attention to themselves that they too might well end up dead, like their master had been.

They were not that brave. Remember that pretty much all of them had not been brave enough to stick with Jesus through his trial and execution. They had all deserted him when he was arrested, Peter had denied him three times, and only the women and John had kept vigil at the cross.

But, these were the people God had chosen to found God's Church, and they weren't chosen because they were extraordinarily brave or clever or gifted, but rather because God could see in them an eagerness to be faithful (even if they sometimes failed) and a willingness to serve. So God gave to them the gift of Holy Spirit at Pentecost which enabled them to have the courage and the passion to step out in faith and begin to share the gospel.

And that was the beginning of the Church, although it must be said that that fledgling Church was often small and vulnerable, and often suffered persecution, but it never, ever died, nor will it ever because it is God's Church.

We are part of that Church. We are not part of it because we are better than anyone else, or cleverer or in any way superior to those around us. We are part of the Church because God calls us to faithfulness and to following in the path of Jesus. God continues to give to God's Church the Holy Spirit in order that we might be strengthened and guided in our faith journey and be enabled to do God's will.

Like Peter, we are a mixture of strengths and weaknesses, gifts and faults, ups and downs, successes and failures, but none the less, we are the people God has chosen to build God's Church on in this time.

We might be well be feeling particularly vulnerable at this time with the threat of COVID 19 hanging over us all, and causing us to feel cut off from life and community. But the God who gave strength and courage to those early Christians is also our God, who will also strengthen us and enable us to find ways to flourish even in hard times.

So, let us have courage, and let us seek to be faithful, and let us follow God's call, and share God's good news in our families, our communities and our world. Amen.

Rev Sandra Houghton, 2020

