

A Community of Witness

Seventh Sunday of Easter (C)

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As Jesus prepared to depart from this earth, he told his disciples, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus did not speak these words to those who had gathered, but to all of us that profess to follow him. We are called to be a witnessing community. This is the fifth dimension of the interlocking communities:

- A community of peace, with Jesus in our Midst
- A community at mission, following our Lord’s lead
- A community of care, as the hands and feet of Jesus
- A prophetic community, speaking forth God’s truth
- A community of witness, proclaiming our Lord and
- A community of power.

A church that does not witness is not a church, just a club. This is the greatest danger we face, that we lose sight of our purpose. That we become inward looking and self-serving, rather than looking outwards to the world and to serve others. And there is no limit. Jesus said, “Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Where we are, our family and our nearest and farther neighbours until we cover the whole world. Our witness cannot be rationalized away. There is nowhere that we shouldn’t witness. So, the question is? Who did you tell this week? Who did we demonstrate the love of Christ to? In our district, 29% record on the census, no religion. That is 3 in 10 individuals or if you like in gross terms, 3,300 individuals.

And the words are quite clear and unqualified: “You will be my witnesses”. Not “You will be my witnesses if you are not busy” or “You will be my witnesses if it is convenient”. Implied is that this is something that we do, in the same way that we breathe.

Not that witnessing is easy. I can tell you the words to say, but the witness is backed up by the action of the individual. We are to witness to Jesus: Who he is and what it is that he has done, but our lives must be shaped by this testimony. If I believe that Jesus has died, that I need not die, but qualify for eternal life, then I must live with this dimension in life. To many of us seem so earthly bound that there is no heavenly dimension in what it is that we are doing. We live within the constraints of this world. We live with no thought of an afterlife. For if we believe that we are called to something greater, then it does not mean that we will not sin, but that we will be conscious of what it is that we risk if we are sinning, and this drives us to repentance.

We need to take a good hard look at ourselves. And not to gloss over our faults but to acknowledge them that we might become the people who Christ would have us be. Each week, we say “Forgive us our sins – (But conditional on) as we forgive those who sin against us”. But how often do the church people exhibit this lack of forgiveness of

others? How often are church people critical of others and their behaviour?

This is because we try to see the church as our club, and we would like to control who joins. This was the sin of Pharisees who were told that Tax Collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom of heaven before them. Jesus tells us that all are welcome and to be welcomed. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

It is a high demand, but this is what faith is all about. We cannot choose our family, nor can we choose our family of faith and certainly some members of our family of faith need more forgiveness than others.

But this is it. This is the witness: that we are now living by a totally different set of precepts. And it is sad to see those who cannot forgive, but that is not any excuse for us not to. Our witness is to be distinctive from the ways of the world.

So, to be a community of witness, we must be living according to the ways of our Lord. The world will notice if we are different. If we are not different to others, then what difference does Christ make.

In the time between the Ascension and Pentecost, the disciples gathered together and prayed, and no doubt sorted out many of the things that were barriers to becoming the faith community.

I remember a priest saying that after a while in a parish, he became aware of two ladies who would not come side by side at the Altar rail. Something in the past had broken their relationship and neither was prepared to deal with it. They said each week forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, yet neither could see this inconsistency. But the world could. The priest had the courage to deal with it and they found space to forgive each other and could witness to Christ’s forgiveness from the Cross.

What about you and I? Are we caught up in the moment, in the ways of the world? True witness begins when we take the risk to obey our Lord.

How can the world respond to this forgiveness unless we demonstrate it? This is part of the call to follow our Lord. Are you ready to try? Can we together strive to build this community of witness as a platform for Christ’s mission?

Christ is Risen

He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!

AMEN