

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Order of Service for Sunday 19th April 2015

Rev'd David R. Coaker

Readings: Luke 24:36–48; Acts 3:12–19

Sermon

'You are witnesses of these things.'

If you have a passing interest in police dramas on television, you will know that eye witnesses are thoroughly unreliable. They will have no idea what colour the car was, let alone it's make or model. The short middle-aged white man we've just seen commit the crime will become a six foot youth in their eyes. In the dramas the police want physical evidence to prove who it was, or, better yet, to catch them in the act.

I've never had to appear in court as a witness. My only encounters with law enforcement, apart from speeding and parking fines, has been to appear in court applying for an alcohol licence for a fair trade cheese and wine evening at church, and to take part in a line up. (I was wondering through Lincoln city centre during my lunch break 20 years ago and got roped in.)

But I have had to formally witness in other ways. Every year the church gets requests from schools asking us to witness to the attendance of children for their admissions criteria. On occasion I also get asked to be a reference for people's job applications.

Being a witness in these cases varies in its difficulty. When you know a person well and they are obviously a good fit for the school or the job they're applying to, filling in the form is a breeze. When you've no idea who they are and are relying on information you've received from others, then it becomes a passing on of facts as you've received them. The most difficult is when you have no basis for witnessing for them, or you have strong reservations about their suitability. Then it becomes a much more complicated task trying to remain factual, being honest, and retaining my integrity, whilst being aware that the person who asked could at some point read what I've written.

There are also many ways that I informally witness. The fact I was unobtainable yesterday evening as I watched Arsenal squeeze past Reading. The choice I made to have my current account with the Co-op because of its ethical stance (which has been under review for a while now). That I chose to pay more for a car so it would have lower emissions and be a hybrid. That my first port of call for shopping is charity shops, and then the high street chains if necessary. That I tithe my income with 5% being split between here and Leyland and the other 5% mainly going to Christian Aid and a mix of other charities. That Rita and I both try to balance work and home pressures trying to give equal priority to both and to each other.

Some of those things you'll know and others will be news to you. Some of the things we witness to we will shout from the roof tops, others we'll keep to ourselves. Sometimes our actions will disclose, sometimes they will conceal.

I faced a choice a few months ago with regard to my political affiliation. I'm a member of a small, but rapidly growing party, and the question was emailed round about seeking candidates for the local and parliamentary elections. I chose not to put my name forward, and unfortunately there is no parliamentary candidate for South Ribble. (If you haven't worked it out I'm a member of the Green party.)

I didn't put my name forward because I haven't the time to do it properly, I wasn't confident I was abreast of all the policies (but was glad the other week after filling in an online questionnaire based

on all the manifestos that I agreed with 86% of it), that it could affect my churches relationships with the borough, and the possibility, however unlikely, that I could be elected.

So after witnessing to that I'm relieved that I can't be charged with telling you how to vote. But I am going to tell you that you should. If we want the right for our opinions to be heard, then we need to engage with the political process. The very least we can do is actually turn up and vote on May 7th, either by posting a letter, or attending a polling station, and placing an X on one or two bits of paper. Is that too much to ask for all of the rights and benefits that living in this nation offers us?

There is no excuse not to vote. So go and do it when the time comes. Whatever the arguments about the bland, disconnected, and self-interested party politics we have, it is still our responsibility to take part. People bled and died for the right to vote to be given to every citizen, whatever their status or gender, so take part in the process.

As long as there is apathy from the electorate we will have apathy returned from those elected. If we are engaged then those we elect will become engaged with us. Change only happens when people try to do something about it.

So on the 7th of May vote. My main concern is that you do vote, but my prayer is that you will take notice of what is being said and written in this campaign and ask yourself which person, what party, best reflects to you the kind of world God dreams of?

Actually going out to vote is a witness to our engagement with our nation. That we believe it is important to at the very least take part. Apathy is not a virtue, and it is definitely not a Christian one.

As Christians we are called to be witnesses. In our reading from Luke the disciples, after their three years of following but not really understanding, are given an intensive training course from the Risen Christ between Easter and Ascension. With the presence of the Risen Christ going over all he had said to them previously and interpreting the Scriptures for them, they had the confidence to be effective witnesses following the day of Pentecost. Those first followers had the benefit of direct instruction and experience, and a community that was thoroughly grounded in their scriptures and religious culture.

Over the course of your lifetimes the world has changed. It used to be the norm that people went to Church; Bible stories were the illustrations used in every-day conversation, and the only choice was what denomination you affiliated yourself with. Now the majority do not declare themselves as Christians, a minority attend Church, Bible stories are no longer well-known, but we do still have this ambiguous sense that we are a Christian country. But we're not sure what that means.

At least now those that turn up have chosen to be here. It isn't a question of doing what was socially acceptable, now everyone has made a positive choice to come along. What has significantly changed is the possibilities for how we can witness to our positive choice.

In the age when everyone attended Church our witness was limited to how nice the building was, the social events, how well folk got along, and whether the preacher told a good story. Everybody went to Church, so the witness was based on whether one church was subjectively better than another one.

Witnessing in those kinds of ways may still work for existing church-goers, who are likely to walk through the doors by themselves or if they know you ask about church, but it doesn't help us to witness to those with no church experience, and people we don't know.

People are no longer choosing which church to attend; they are quite happily living their lives, in the main part, oblivious that the Church even exists or has anything to offer.

So how are we to witness?

Firstly, be ourselves. Forget about what you think you should say or do, if the subject comes up, engage with it. Try our best to live a life as Christ would live it, and be open to the opportunities that arise. If someone sees something in you that attracts them to a life of faith, answer their questions, engage with their situation, do this to the best of your ability trusting in God that the necessary words and ideas will come to you. Don't worry if you haven't memorised the Bible, Church history, every theological debate there ever has been; answer any questions that are put to you to the best of your ability. People will respect an honest 'I don't know' much more than a declaration of certainty with no foundation. You are all witnesses to Christ. You have all been called by Christ to witness to the good news of God. You're already qualified. Jesus says you are. So just trust in God's confidence in you.

Secondly, as we trust God in our own personal circumstances we need to trust God more together as Church. In a previous age we could get away with behaving like a private club, voting for what we wanted, and choosing in comparison to what other churches, also acting like private clubs, were doing. We can't now be Church without placing our trust in God, and not just in ourselves. Now decisions need all of us to engage with them, to pray about them, to listen, to share our views, and come together to discern the will of God as we gather as church meeting. Church meeting is an act of prayer, coming close to God, and not the making of decisions based on the force of an argument or individual will. That has always been the ideal, but it is ever more crucial now.

Thirdly, we have to try to put ourselves in other people's shoes. This is both something for us to do within and outside these walls. We have to accept that we have no idea what people that haven't had church-going as a constant in their lives, think of us. We don't know what they're looking for. We have to find ways of creating space for conversations to happen, for ideas to grow, and be open to trying different things whilst maintaining the balance between giving up too soon or flogging a dead horse.

Between each other we need to try to understand where we are each coming from. We need to listen, be forgiving, to let go of past slights (real or perceived), ask questions rather than just assume answers, and always keep before us the example of Christ. Before we open our mouths or do something we need to have the thought 'How would Jesus respond?'

And if we think Jesus would keep his mouth shut, offer to help, ask a question, give someone a hug, offer an encouraging word, call down the wrath of God or sing praises to God, then we should do the same. Just a reminder that Jesus kept the wrath for exceptional circumstances: hypocrisy, persecuting the poor etc, not choosing a hymn you don't like.

Whether we like it or not; whether we are consciously doing it or not; we are Christ's witnesses.

By being here, by choosing to affiliate ourselves with the Church, as it is expressed as Penwortham United Reformed Church; we are witnesses. Our challenge is to be witnesses that are true to the way of Christ, that show, encourage and declare the Kingdom of God; that are truly lights in this world for the good of all.

A silent, inactive witness is no witness at all. We all have something we can say or do that witnesses to the love of God we have experienced by living a life of faith.

We have been called as witnesses as we are, for who we are, and whatever the insecurities we have, Christ is certain about us.

God trusts us to act together to discern God's will.

God inspires our hearts and minds, is within the connections between us all, and waits in anticipation for how we will make God's dreams reality.

"Peace be with you." "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

You are witnesses of these things. In Christ's name. **Amen**