

We are reminded periodically by the leaders of various Christian denominations of the need to focus on Evangelism. This usually takes the form of an official announcement. “This year is to be the year of Evangelism” is a phrase bound to set on edge the teeth of many who sit in the pews of mainline churches. And teeth are not the only part of the human anatomy to be affected by the word, “Evangelism”. It also seems to affect people’s bottoms, as they find themselves squirming in their seats. Fear not, as a lifelong squirmer myself, I am not likely to be found standing up here demanding that you instantly run out into the streets of Morpeth and its surrounds, beating on people’s doors. As reluctant as we may be to consider it in our own lives, there is no doubt, that it is part of our job description as Christians. And if we have to face this, it might as well be at the beginning of the year, as somewhere in the middle, so that we have sufficient time and leisure to consider how it may affect our own Christian lives.

When I first embarked upon Theological studies over 30 years ago, several of my fellow students hailed from American churches, some of which dated from the 18th and 19th Centuries. Their traditions were decidedly anti-intellectual, ignored Church history and majored in very aggressive evangelistic life styles. They were stunned in Church History classes to learn that Evangelism wasn’t an invention of the 20thC, nor exclusive to their particular church adherents. It was a positive revelation to them, that such people as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, Francis of Assisi and John Knox, to name but a few, had also struggled with the basics of the Gospel and how the churches of their day, could best share what they had discovered, with others. The only Evangelist these students knew of, was Billy Graham. But I suspect that there are those in the modern church here in the British Isles, who have also forgotten, that sharing the Good News of Jesus was an integral part of the Christian Life, right from the beginning. Few of us are privileged to be able to spend time studying the records of those who have gone before us in the Christian life, so I suppose it is to be expected. But we need not remain in ignorance. We may not find the thought of spending time in dusty old books very attractive. But we could be radical and join the modern generations in exploring on the internet, should the subject interest us. It is amazing what you can learn from a mouse or a touchpad.

Folk in churches where, for generation after generation, the attitude seemed to be that one’s relationship with God was a personal matter, have great difficulty with the notion of sharing this part of themselves, with other people. After all matters of the soul have to do with one’s inmost being, and we share such things with only a few people who are close to us. We fear that others will not understand, or that they will ridicule us for our beliefs. It might be seen as a means of exposing our weaknesses, from the world’s point of view, and we will do anything to protect ourselves.

Also it is not seen as very mainstream or trendy to be concerned about God and church matters. Perhaps there was a time in our history when it was politic to attend church and at least feign belief in God, but not any more. And then there is the more pragmatic reason that we may not really understand what the Gospel means and fear our inability to explain it to someone. And what if they should ask us difficult questions? Well, it is not as though we lack experience in answering difficult questions. Those of us who have had any experience of children, will know that from the minute they can talk, they start asking difficult questions. If we are smart, when we don’t know the answer, we admit it straight away and promise to try and find out. The same technique works very well with spiritual matters. We none of us know all the answers and need feel no shame in admitting it.

There is some benefit to us, I think, in being reminded that sharing one’s faith in God has featured prominently in the life of God’s people for many centuries. Even before Jesus was born, some individuals including the prophets, felt called to share God’s purposes for Israel and the wider world. Our readings for today reflect a variety of times and circumstances where this call was heard. The prophet Isaiah in OT times, John the Baptist and Simon Peter, both contemporaries of Jesus and St. Paul, a messenger in the era of the early Christian Church, all believed that God had called them, by name, for special tasks. In their own lives, each one of them pondered their experience of God, and exactly what was the nature of the message they had been given. Each one was quite convinced that they, as individuals, had benefited from their encounter with God, and that the world would also, if it would only listen to their message.

What does it mean to be called by God? As it is not a subject widely discussed, most people have naught but their own experience to go by. It is true that there are plenty of examples in Scripture, of

individuals being singled out by God, often by name, for special tasks. But these are definitely the minority. They are the ones who caught an author's attention. Over the centuries millions of ordinary folk have been called by God, be it in their families, their Sunday school or in the midst of some other life experience. In the infancy of the church, many people heard the Good News about God and His son, Jesus and went on their way, sharing it with their neighbours and their families as opportunity arose. The Wash-houses and markets must have been buzzing! Some even established House Churches in their own homes, and at a time when it was quite dangerous to abandon accepted worship. They had definitely been called by God.

In dangerous times and in safer ones, God can be quite creative in His attempts to reach people. I am reminded of a couple that I met at a dinner party in Oxford. They lived out in the country and had to be back home reasonably early. It transpired that their 10 yr old son was very keen to sing in a Church choir in town, and they were required to transport him to church twice a week for this purpose. Not being spiritually inclined themselves, they were quite annoyed by this. I chuckled to myself thinking that the Almighty was up to His underhanded ways again. I have no idea what became of this boy, but I never forgot the conversation.

The significance to Christian believers is that we are all of us, called to be followers of Jesus, whatever the nature of our call. Most folk are convinced in their own minds that this is the right course for them to take. No angels appear to them, they have no visions, no spectacular spiritual experiences- just quiet conviction. In my own case, it was the realisation that I had to get off the fence. Either I believed in God and was prepared to trust him with my life, or not. I remember feeling that a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and that I had been such a fool for taking so long over the decision. And look where that got me – 4,000 miles from home!

And once the call from God has gone out and been received? Then what? Let us eavesdrop on two situations in the NT and see what happened then. In our reading from John, we observe that two Galileans, who seemingly are spiritually inclined, are in conversation with John the Baptist. He is eager to share his experience of Jesus and the reasons for his conviction that here is the long-awaited Messiah. Andrew is very intrigued by this, and he and a companion are so attracted to Jesus that they set about following him. After an invitation, they spend some time with Jesus. They too are very attracted by his message & are also convinced of his identity. Andrew rushes off home to share this experience with his brother Simon Peter. Ever the curious one, Peter insists on meeting Jesus himself, and his life and his name are never the same again. St. Paul on the other hand, as he tells us in Corinthians, had a rather more spectacular and painful meeting with Jesus. Paul must have been very stubborn and single-minded for Jesus to have to blind him and to throw him off his horse, in order to get his attention! Still, his experience of Jesus was so powerful in so many ways, and his conviction that Jesus was indeed both Son of God and Messiah, that Paul spent the remainder of his life sharing that experience with others.

All of these people were doing something that has a very old-fashioned name – giving their testimony. I don't know about you, but I find that expression very intimidating indeed. And so misleading. Remember the buzzing Wash-houses and markets where people were sharing their experiences of meeting Jesus. Today those might be the pubs, or the Play Groups or the coffee mornings. We are not meant to be terrified into standing up in front of a group of people and giving our Christian bone fides. We are meant to be quietly sharing how our prayers have been answered, or how the Holy Spirit has helped us through a difficult experience, and only when it seems appropriate. When groups of people meet to discuss books such as "The Shack" or "Chocolat" some folk feel encouraged to share their experiences of God and the Holy Spirit. It is not very easy at first, but like everything else, practice helps. It is true that some individuals might be called to special ministries of sharing the Good News. For most of us, it is the conviction that Jesus is so important in our lives that we do not want to keep it to ourselves.

In the event that we should need reminding of why Jesus is so important in our lives, we have only to look a bit further on in the letter to the Corinthians. Paul very efficiently lays the reasons out for us. Having been called into fellowship with Christ we have been given abundant supplies of his grace and appropriate spiritual gifts. Our ability to speak about God & our knowledge of him has been deepened. God will be faithful to us throughout our lives, regardless of the circumstance, & when he comes again we will be found blameless & fit to share his fellowship. And that surely is news worth sharing!