

## **Witnesses to Christ**

*A sermon preached by Revd Viv Bridges at St Peter's Wolvercote on St Bartholomew's Day, Sunday 24 August, 2014*

Isaiah 43.8-13, 1 Corinthians 4.9-15, Luke 22.24-30

During the first two weeks of August I was 'off- duty'. Peter and I didn't go away anywhere, and so we did lots of those chores that keep getting put off – cleaning the carpets, airing the blankets, gardening and so on. We also got up in to the loft to sort through what had been 'dumped' up there through the years. There was much that we had inherited from our parents, including lots of photos, letters, papers – and MANY slides. Peter had an extremely laborious job – using a hand viewer to sort through his slides, but I found that my father had labelled every single one of nearly two thousand slides! I kept any that mentioned members of the family but any 'views' of the countryside, or pictures of flowers – especially cacti – he was a great cactus enthusiast – I threw away. But as I was doing so, I felt some sadness that somehow I was doing away with a big part of this man's life – our family holidays, his enthusiasms.

Various certificates affirmed that he was a very clever man. He worked for most of his life for the Post Office looking after TELEPRINTERS, the 'internet' of the time. When the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War started he stayed at home because he worked at the meteorological office and it was crucial to keep teleprinters working so that vital information could be passed on about weather conditions. So there were also letters to and from his 'HOME GUARD' battalion – explaining where he should meet for drill, or explaining that he hadn't been at drill because he was working.

So – not much of great note about my father – and when my generation is gone, no one will really remember him... but I don't for a minute think that he expected to be remembered. I believe this is true for virtually everyone who fought in battle, or at home, during the First World War.

Up until quite recently we heard a lot about the vast numbers of men women and children who were killed or wounded as a result of this conflict, but they were basically 'statistics' .. line after line of the injured transported back to England, thousands of bodies buried where they fell and perhaps reburied later in one of the many war cemeteries with their line after line of white tombstones. The great majority were simply 'numbers' to most of the world, known only to their close friends and families. It's ironic, perhaps, that one of the best known of the fallen soldiers is, in fact, the UNKNOWN warrior.

Things are very different today in many ways. Quite rightly every soldier who is killed 'on duty' is brought home with full military honours. The repatriation is usually televised, with some details about the particular soldier - no longer just a 'number'

but a person, an individual. And there have been many programmes recently that have sought to 'repersonalise', if you like, some of those involved in World War 1. Documentaries and dramas using real footage and the diaries of soldiers, nurses or civilians have almost 'brought to life' some of those 'numbers', 'statistics'. I find it fascinating that the true story of one individual in the trenches or here at home, with photos of that individual, can have far more impact than footage of thousands of troops 'going over the top', or lines of returning injured men and women.

This 'individualisation' is, perhaps, one of the main features of our society today, and although much of it is good, it also has its grim side. It is hugely important that we value each human being with equal respect and care for their needs (not always the case). But, as in most things in life, the balance can be lost. Many people today seem to feel the need to be 'famous', known by the world at large. There is a host of reality TV shows offering everyone the opportunity to appear on television – and it doesn't seem to matter if this involves making a fool of oneself. Everyone now has the opportunity to post their 'selfies' on the World Wide Web, and to air their views (however outrageous) to the world at large. 'Celebrity' seems to be one of the most sought after commodities of our society – almost as important as money, perhaps. The thing I find rather depressing about this is that much of it seems to be a search for fame for its own sake. It often seems an empty, 'puffed up' self-importance, with nothing of true value at its heart and with no lasting value.

Jesus frequently warned us against *looking* fame, for 'importance'. He didn't suggest that being well known, achieving great things, were wrong in themselves, but he knew that the motivation could be wrong: achieving fame as a consequence of great talent, skill, or commitment to serving others is very different from desiring celebrity status for its own sake. Jesus also recognised the danger of pride and vanity. He taught that 'the greatest among you must become like the youngest', and that he himself came to serve, rather than to be served. St Paul recognised this – in Philippians he wrote 'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit'.

For Christians, what matters is that we should focus on following Christ alone, opening our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit for guidance about what to do, and for strength to actually do it. Then, it doesn't matter what particular task we are given to do, every task is equally important in building God's kingdom. St Paul was also well aware of this – he spoke eloquently of how vital every 'job', small or large, was in building up the body of Christ.

Christ calls us all to his service, to discipleship, and for some this may lead to something 'great', that will be remembered by the world at large. St Paul is remembered because his deep, deep commitment to Christ led to the spread of the Gospel world wide, through his travels and through his writings. St Peter was strengthened to be the founder of the Church, John and Matthew are remembered through their Gospels.

Today we remember St Bartholomew – but no one is very certain what he actually did, and we're not even absolutely certain of his name. 'Bartholomew' isn't mentioned in John's Gospel, but he was probably the 'Nathaniel' who John describes as a friend of Philip and whose immediate reaction to Jesus was 'can anything good come out of Nazareth'! But Jesus called him 'a man of no deceit' – so an honest man - and Nathaniel (Bartholomew) replied with an affirmation of Jesus' identity 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God'. So his commitment to Christ was total, and he showed this by spreading the Gospel, probably to India, and by dying for his faith. He was probably flayed alive and then crucified upside down!

Bartholomew was called, as we are, to be 'a witness to Christ' – we are Christ's only witnesses in our world today. We may do memorable things (write books, be great actors or actresses, be leaders of one sort or another) and if so, we need even more help and guidance from the Holy Spirit in order to carry out our task, and more importantly, to remain fixed on Christ alone to avoid becoming vain and self-righteous. In this morning's Epistle Paul berated the Corinthians because they had become proud, self-satisfied, 'puffed up', at how 'righteous' they thought they had become. (He was being sarcastic when he said they were 'wise, strong, held in honour'. This was what they thought about themselves.) How easy it is for us all to slip in to this self-righteousness because we go to church, or take time to pray, or do 'good works'. But Paul reminds us that we could do NOTHING of any of this if it wasn't a gift from God.

Most of us (like my father) will be called to live simple lives, known by only a few people around us. There will be no 'greatness', nothing to be remembered, but if our lives are rooted and grounded in Christ, spent in serving those around us in action or in prayer, or in doing our daily chores and jobs with integrity and in a spirit of gratitude and love, then they will be rich and joyous lives, fulfilling the potential of our true selves.... very different from lives that depend only on an empty desire for worldly recognition for its own sake.

Today's prayer after communion asks God that we may be strengthened to witness to his truth, and that we may 'DRAW EVERYONE TO THE FIRE OF YOUR LOVE'. If our lives are motivated by a loving response to God's great love for us, then we may indeed, draw those around us to the fire of God's love, whether we are, in the eyes of the world, the greatest or the least.

*(Post-communion prayer: Almighty God, who on the day of Pentecost sent your Holy Spirit to the apostles with the wind from heaven and in tongues of flame, filling them with joy and boldness to preach the gospel: by the power of the same Spirit strengthen us to witness to your truth and to draw everyone to the fire of your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.)*