

Followers of the Way

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers on Sunday 20th April 2008 (the Fifth Sunday of Easter) at St Peter's Wolvercote. The service included the baptism of three adults.

Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

At the age of 14, I took my first conscious step on my Christian journey. Some friends at school invited me to go with them on a holiday organised by a Christian group at my school. They invited me and kept inviting me. They badgered and encouraged and eventually wore me down. I went in fear and trepidation. On the morning I left, I can remember saying to my mother, "I hope I don't come back too religious". Look what happened!

Once I was on the holiday, I had such a fantastic time that I didn't want to come home. I went back year after year, until by the age of 17, I realised I was going not just for the fun of it, but for deeper spiritual reasons as well. That was my way into faith, and I'm very grateful to those friends who persuaded me to go on that first holiday.

All of us have different stories to tell about our journey to faith. Some people are born into churchgoing families, and have never known anything different. But as they grow up, at some point they come to accept a living faith for themselves. Some people have an inner sense that they want to take that step, and they eventually decide to do something about it. For others, friends play a significant role. Their friends' faith obviously gives them so much and enriches their lives that they are inspired to discover more. Others still set out on a journey of faith because of some event in their lives – the birth of a child or the death of a loved one.

All of us have different stories to tell about how we started on this journey towards God – how we became "followers of the Way", to use an expression from the early Church. Hayley, Kevin and Reuben, who are being baptised in this service, will each have their own story to tell about what has brought them to this morning's service and their decision to be baptised. All our stories are different, unique, individual. And yet they all converge; they all flow in the same direction. There are three things in particular which they all have in common.

First, they are all focussed on a living relationship with Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel reading, there is an exchange between Jesus and Thomas. Jesus says: "You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas – doubting Thomas, who is so often a wonderful spokesman for the whole human race – says, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" The key thing about Jesus' reply to Thomas is that he doesn't give him a set of abstract principles or practical rules; he doesn't present him with a list of commandments chiselled on two stone tablets; he doesn't hand him a map and say "follow this"; he doesn't give him a Sat Nav and say "use this"; he doesn't say "*this* is the way".

No, he says, "*I* am the way." In other words, the journey to God – the Christian path – is about entering into a personal living relationship with Christ. It's not about keeping

dry rules (though rules are not unhelpful on our spiritual journeys). It's more than that. It's about living in the company of Christ; reflecting on his teachings; walking with him in prayer; allowing ourselves to be moulded by the Spirit into his likeness. This is the Way – not dry rules, but a personal, living, dynamic relationship.

This leads into the second thing our journeys have in common. In baptism and confirmation, we commit ourselves to travel in a certain direction – towards Christ. What that means is that we commit ourselves to allowing God to make us more like Jesus Christ – to allowing him to grow within us the qualities of love, generosity, self-giving, service of others, prayerfulness, which marked Jesus out. And in committing ourselves to face in that direction, equally we commit ourselves to turn away from their opposites – selfishness, “me first”, hate, revenge, spite and so on. Our journey is a turning from those things to Christlike qualities. And in baptism we express that when we say “I repent of my sins” and “I turn to Christ”. The direction of travel is clear.

Of course, being human, there are always things which pull us back in the opposite direction, and so the commitment made in baptism and confirmation has to be re-made week by week to keep us facing towards Christ.

The third thing that our Christian journeys have in common is that they are not solitary journeys. We travel with each other, and together we are the pilgrim people of God, supporting each other and being supported by each other. There is a story of a young man going to see a wise, elderly man. They sit together beside a warm glowing fire. The young man asks the older: “Do I need to go to Church to be a Christian? Can't I travel on my Christian journey alone at home? The older man says nothing in reply. Instead he leans forward, picks up the fire tongs, takes one coal out of the fire and places it on the hearth. Gradually the single coal goes colder and its glow fades. Then, after a time, he reaches forward again, picks up the coal and places it back in the fire. Very quickly it is warmed by the other coals and glows brighter, adding its light and warmth to all the others'. Our faith glows brighter when we worship together, our faith warms and encourages others, our presence makes the whole Church burn that bit brighter.

But we don't just travel with each other. We also travel with Christ. There is a wonderful icon from the 6th century which depicts Abbot Mena in Middle Egypt standing next to Christ (*see the St Peter's Net page of the St Peter's Wolvercote, website*). If you look carefully, you will see that Christ has his arm around Abbot Mena's shoulder. It's a gesture of support, guidance and protection. On our journeys, Christ travels with us, walking beside us, guiding us, supporting us, his arm around our shoulder. He is there beside Hayley, Kevin and Reuben. He is there beside each of us.

So though each of us has our own unique story of our journey of faith, we all have those three things in common: all of us are focussed on a living, personal relationship with Christ; all of us are committed to walking in the same direction, allowing God to develop Christ's qualities within us; and all of us have the support and guidance not just of our fellow pilgrims, but of Christ himself, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen.