

EASTER 2 – STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY 2010

You know it's not usually heroes, or the successful that inspire me. It's more often the one who fails, but who doesn't give up, and keeps trying. They may never be king of the ring, but they hang on in there, in spite of all that comes their way.

And that's why I love the disciples so much. Their lives and ministries are fraught with failings, weaknesses, doubts and inadequacies. There's Peter and his denials at Jesus' trial. There's James and John foolishly seeking top seats in heaven. There's glum faithlessness when Jesus challenges them to feed the 5,000, and repeated ignorance when he teaches on forgiveness, mercy, and healing.

And today we hear about Thomas, who, in spite of the inspired witness from the other 10 disciples, could not, in his heart, believe what they were telling him - that Jesus was alive. He has to wait a whole week before he gets the proof he so dearly claimed he needed, when Jesus appeared a second time in that upper room, and bade them all "peace be with you".

Yet these, along with Judas the traitor – these were the men Jesus chose to be his closest friends, and the ones [other than Judas] who would, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, spearhead the life and work of the early church.

And what is so consoling and inspiring is that if Jesus went out of his way to choose these kinds of characters, with all their doubts and weaknesses, their shortcomings and failings to lead his mission in the world, well, then there is hope for the likes of you and me, with all our failings too. He doesn't need heroes – he needs enduring and committed workers. He chooses people like us. Grafters.

For it would have been easy for Thomas, with all his doubts, to have held back from being with the others, and gone and done his own thing. He was the only one still stranded on Good Friday whilst all the others were celebrating Easter. But he stuck it out, he hung on in there, and his dedication was rewarded. The proof came the following Sunday, and then Thomas too, was able to exclaim "My Lord and My God".

But ministry was going to cost them. Many would pay with their lives for being loyal to Jesus – for opposition was coming not only from the Pharisees, which we heard about in our reading from Acts this morning, but from Rome itself. Indeed, only the Apostle John is thought to have lived to old age – the rest becoming martyrs for the sake of the gospel for which they lived and died.

And now, the baton of witness is passed on from Thomas, and Peter, and Mary Magdalene, to you and me. It's our turn to do our bit. Jesus had said to Thomas "You believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen, yet have come to believe". We claim that blessing, for though I am sure some of us have felt Jesus near us in a very real way, none have experienced what Thomas received.

So what will our discipleship, our commitment cost us? More than likely, not our lives. In this country, in this age, we are fortunate to be free to worship without too much let or hindrance. But we are at a time in the church's history when finances are particularly tight, and whereas, in the past, the Church of England in particular, has been able to support itself on ancient legacies and endowments, the same is no longer true. If St Andrew's Ferring wants to continue as a distinct parish with it's own priest, we need to prove ourselves capable of financial aptitude.

For some months now, a small working party, endorsed by the PCC, has been preparing a stewardship campaign which we launch this morning. There is for everyone on the Electoral Role, a letter and a leaflet that I would like you to take home, read through, pray about, and then respond to. There are spare envelopes for those we have missed, and I would encourage everyone to take the literature and think and pray about this matter. Though your giving of course remains private, I look forward to receiving your responses at a Thanksgiving Service, a fortnight today, on the 25th April.

Last year, the Worthing Deanery kindly showed us leniency in asking for just £40,000 towards the cost of ministry. They knew we had had a difficult time. This year, we are committed to paying £50,000. But you will see from your literature later, that the full cost per parish is around £58,000 for this year. Ideally, we would like to reach this target, as a sign of our commitment to God, his mission, and to St Andrew's.

I know finances are tight for everyone, and many are on reduced incomes because investments are paying less interest than in the past. I know gas and electric and petrol are all up, up, up. But I still want to challenge you to go away and think and pray about what you give back to God and his church week by week, and to consider if that amount needs amending. We do have some savings put by as a church, and they might keep us going for a little while. But really, we need to cover our running costs year by year from what comes in; to prove ourselves efficient and financially healthy.

What I won't ever do is tell you how much you must give. That is for you prayerfully to decide, and to take into account what other charities you choose to support too. But Jesus spoke very clearly about priorities in life, and we do well to listen to him.

Of course stewardship is not just about money. It is about what we do – our actions and efforts as well - ministry and mission. This will be a focus of the PCC in the coming months, so that time, talents *and* money are prayerfully considered in this village.

We have an challenging commission. Jesus said to the disciples “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. Now it is our turn to carry the light of the gospel here in Ferring. Let us do it with dedication, fervour and a cheerful heart.

Amen.