

Beyond reasonable doubt - 16/04/23

On Thursday evening, just as Sheila and I were having supper, the phone went; it was the ER at Chilliwack hospital. They had an old lady who was dying and could I come, please?

It turned out to be quite a big deal, as she was an elderly indigenous lady in her 90's, and the whole family had turned out to see her passing. There was singing and actual gentle drumming on her body. After giving her the last rites and apologizing for not having a spare rosary to put in her hand - they told me that the old lady had been a staunch Roman Catholic all her life and prayed her rosary all the time - I left, not letting on that I was an Anglican priest.

Whilst washing my hands outside the cubicle, an old man on a stretcher called out to me and asked if I could say some prayers for him. It turned out that what he really wanted was absolution - he kept saying, over and over, 'Jesus, forgive my sins, Jesus, forgive my sins...'. Whatever physical ailment he may have had, that was not his priority at that moment. He desperately wanted to be absolved of his sins.

Having spent some time with him and made a new friend, I was walking out through the waiting area to the ER when another voice called out to me, asking to come over. Yet another person and his wife in distress, and in need of some pastoral care. I had already had

an earlier opportunity to hear this man's confession and pronounce God's absolution, so this was a separate issue - but nonetheless challenging for both him and his wife.

I tell this story not because I want to sound wonderful, but to make you aware of the huge need there is for a hospital chaplain. This is the third year that I have, with Bishop John, tried to persuade Fraser Health to let me be on-call chaplain to Chilliwack hospital. Fraser Health don't want me to do that, as I would be a volunteer, and so not salaried by them, and so not under their auspices - in their view. Unfortunately for them, I had already been around all the wards in the hospital months

earlier, and given them my card telling them I would come whenever needed. Fraser Health then went around later to tell them that they were NOT to call me - except for my own parishioners - as they were going to implement a Spiritual Health Team to cover all eventualities. Nothing has been in place for the last 12 years, and nothing continues to be in place.

Anyway, it was good to be called and be of use - but the message was clear to me, and reinforced again at our local Men's Breakfast, which takes place currently on the second Saturday of the month at the Riverside Church on Morrow Road at 0800.

Yesterday morning we were watching a short video of Francis Chan's ministry on the second chapter of Mark's gospel, where a paralytic is let down through the roof of a house because there is no way the disciples can get him through the crowd to the door. Jesus tells the man his sins are forgiven, which incenses the Pharisees who take it that Jesus is blaspheming. Jesus goes on to heal the man's paralysis, but the prime action is to forgive the man's sins. Just the same as the man I ministered to in the hospital didn't ask for relief from pain or healing of whatever physical condition was ailing him - but simply, 'Jesus, forgive me my sins...' over and over.

Now some of the more perceptive of you may have noticed that so far I have not made a single reference to any of the readings we have had today, and there's a reason for that, you may be relieved to hear.

What all our readings emphasize today is the reliability of the facts of Jesus' life and resurrection.

The Acts reading (in place of an Old Testament reading) is a carefully argued logical explanation of God's plan for Jesus, including his death and resurrection. 'Let me explain this to you, listen carefully to what I say...' says Peter. You all know that Jesus was an amazing miracle worker - you saw him

yourselves - '...and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.' But God freed him from death, Peter says, as was foretold by David in the psalms; and you all know David, says Peter, 'I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.'

This is solid fact, says Peter, because you can all go and see his tomb. But David was also a prophet, says Peter, because '...Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.'

So this is beyond all reasonable doubt. David's Psalm 16 says, '...; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay,' thus confirming in advance, the resurrection we have just witnessed.

The well-known story of 'Doubting Thomas' who would not believe until he had put his hands in the prints of the nails, or the spear thrust in Jesus' side, is further evidence - if it were needed - that Jesus is no hologram or spectre, but real and alive. Don't ask me how - that's for God to know and not me.

Jesus and John tie up this gospel between them with the best exhortations and encouragement; 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' These are Jesus' words - but look at how they are echoed by Peter; 'Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.'

This last comment brings me to another point that was raised at the Men's Breakfast; one man said that there were two sorts of people

in the world - those who were saved, and those who were not.

I disagreed with him on the grounds that although we have been forgiven our sins, we go on sinning, so, as Paul says, we need to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling and that we are in the process of being saved, we still running the race, we have not yet received the prize.

It is not as though we suddenly become perfect - just because we have a redeemer and saviour - any more than we stop being an alcoholic, just because we've found a way to stop drinking.

What we can rely on though, is the solid fact of Jesus' resurrection as the foundation of

our faith, and the source of living strength from which we find the ability to live our lives out as real Christians - not just Sunday Christians, or Christians who have to put something in the box on a form that asks for your religion. I would argue that Christianity is not a religion, but a relationship anyway, and living in the presence of Christ is more than the telling of it. Otherwise we are no better than the dry drunk, who may not be drinking, but spends his or her time just thinking constantly about the drink they're not getting, and resenting every moment of their sobriety.

As I said last week, to live in Christ is to be a new creation, to be born again, to know a new happiness and a new freedom.

John wraps up his gospel with the sentence, 'But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.'

Beyond any reasonable doubt.