

I approach the act of preaching about scripture from the perspective that what we have in scripture is the absolute best efforts of supremely talented, prayerful, faithful people throughout the ages to understand God and God's creation. In every age that understanding is bound to be flawed because even the greatest of human minds cannot fully approach the inestimable power and wisdom of the creator.

We know that there are some of our fellow Christians who truly believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God. I cannot imagine anything more blasphemous and more bibliolatrous. The very idea that God can be contained within the pages of a library like the Bible no matter how holy and how divinely inspired its various authors might have been, borders on madness. I am not sure whether the blasphemy or the absurdity of such a position is worse.

The Holy Bible is our guide to approaching some level of understanding of our relationship with God. It carries the wisdom of the ages, but apart from multiple different translations into a myriad of human languages none of it was written in the last 1900 years. I cannot believe for one minute that God has not spoken to his people in nearly two millennia. As Anglicans we have

believed for nearly 500 years that our faith is founded on three pillars: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. We believe in balance among the three. None is superior to the others; and none is meant to function alone.

Our readings for today's service present us with an opportunity to understand the limitations of scripture that tradition and reason can offset.

Here is a quote from each of our readings:

Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Acts 2: 31 - 32

Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1: 8 - 9

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in

the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue^l to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

John 20: 28 – 31

Clearly, the theme behind our three readings, from Acts, the 1st Letter of Peter, and the Gospel of John, this morning is witness and belief. The two words are inextricably linked. In the biblical context they largely mean the same thing.

For those of us who speak English, witness and belief seem quite different. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), belief is primarily defined as the mental acceptance of a proposition or alleged fact as true, often involving confidence, trust, or faith. It entails a conviction that something is true, or that someone is telling the truth, which may exist without absolute, direct proof. On the other hand when used as a verb, witness according to the OED means To bear witness; to testify, or to be present and see an event take place (e.g., "to witness an accident"). But in Biblical Greek the words translated into English as witness and belief have very different connotations. In Biblical Greek the word translated as witness is *martus*. It describes someone who saw Jesus or his resurrection and testifies

to it. There is nothing passive about *martus*. A witness or a *martus* is not a passive observer, a *martus* is an active messenger who takes his or her obligation to spread the message so seriously that even the threat of death is not a deterrent. *Martus* is the root of the English word martyr. Some one who lays down life for the sake of faith.

When the noun belief or the verb to believe is used in the Christian Scriptures it is a translation of the Greek word *pistis* as a noun and *pisteuō* as a verb. But neither as noun or verb does the word mean intellectual agreement or acceptance. It means deep conviction. Conviction of a character that demands action, response, commitment, staking one's life on the line for the sake of truth.

As I hope you can hear, much is lost in translation. The English translations rob the text of so much of its power. For people of our vintage most of us probably got our first exposure of what it was to be a witness on Perry Mason. For us to witness just means to observe while to believe means to accept a proposition. Neither word claims our lives. Neither word transforms our existence beyond imagining. But just that level of transformation is what is meant in our readings this morning.

When John says at the end of Chapter 20: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name*, he is speaking of that level of radical transformation beyond anything we have hitherto known.

Again, much is lost in translation. *you may have life in his name*. The life that is spoken of is not just having a pulse, being able to breathe. In Greek that kind of life is *bios*. But John does not speak of *bios* in his name. John speaks of *zōēn* which is the divine spiritual life of God – a God kind of life with fullness and power. In his name signifies the authority, character, and person of Jesus. We have *bios*, but only through the mediation of Jesus can we have *zōēn*, true life, active, blessed, and linked to the person of Jesus the Christ.

And what is our route to *zōēn* that true life in Christ? We are asked to witness and to believe – not in the pale, tepid manner suggested by our English words, but in the powerful, active, committed manner without regard to cost for which the Christ both demands and for which the Christ makes possible. If we truly witness

and believe, we too will become part of the great cloud of witnesses who have sustained faith in every age.

I have a suggestion that you may find useful. When reading Christian scripture take from it the most powerful meaning you can and then double or triple it.

In closing, I want to connect our reading from John this morning to the beginning of John's Gospel.

Although our reading from John comes at the end of Chapter 20 and there is still one additional chapter in the Gospel, most Biblical scholars believe that Chapter 20 is the end of John's work. Chapter 21 is believed to be a later addition.

Remember the first Chapter of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The life that came into being was not bios. The promise from the beginning was that the Christ brought *zōēn*, the divine life of God to those who believe. And that is

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the complete message of the wonderful, mystical Gospel of John from its beginning to its end: *believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have real life in his name.*

Amen