

Surprise, Peace and Service: Becoming His Witnesses

Fiona Gardiner, 18 April 2021

Lord, teach us, lead us, inspire us, call us
as we live and worship together
in the flow of your never failing love. Amen.

Peace be with you!

'Well, I never expected that!'

Have you ever said these words? Suddenly we see or experience something that startles and amazes us and we exclaim: 'Well, I never expected that!'

It happened to me yesterday morning, in a very small way. I glanced out of the spare bedroom window and saw a shape at the top of our rather large apple tree. I thought it was Cyril the squirrel, come to raid the bird-feeders. It wasn't. It was next door's very young Siamese cat! Well, I never expected that.

Of course this is as nothing compared with the emotions the disciples must have experienced. Cleopas and his friend (or his wife) had just rushed back from Emmaus to tell the disciples all about their meeting with the risen Lord, and how they had recognised him when he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it at supper. The disciples are still exclaiming and arguing over this when suddenly, Jesus is standing amongst them, greeting them with peace. (Peace: his first gift to them!)

The gospel writer, Luke, describes them as startled and frightened, as if they'd seen a ghost. No matter what the women had said on their return from the empty tomb, despite Peter's sighting of the empty grave cloths, despite Cleopas's testimony THEY NEVER EXPECTED that Jesus would turn up...just like that.

Despite all Jesus had taught them, all the Scriptures he'd quoted, all the times he'd talked about signs of Jonah...they just couldn't believe their eyes. I don't think I can blame them!

Even when he showed them his scarred hands and feet, their joy and amazement were enormous, but they still couldn't quite grasp it all. Even when they were invited to touch him, hug him, the questions remained.

Are there things we find it difficult to grasp or hard to believe? I am sure there are incidents and teachings in the Bible that puzzle us. What's God's attitude to such puzzlement, such soul-searching?

Jesus told us that if we have seen him, we have seen the Father. *What would Jesus do?* Was a popular question among our Christian young folks a while back. It's perhaps a little simplistic, but it's also really helpful. Saying this to ourselves gives us the chance to take a beat, hesitate and think clearly. So what did Jesus do when faced with his disciples' doubts and fear that day?

He asked for something to eat and then ate a piece of broiled fish.

I wish Luke had described their expressions as they watched this. I wish he'd pictured for us the wide smile on Jesus' face as the penny dropped. This WAS Jesus, not a ghost. Jesus, who had been tortured, who had died, who had been entombed. And here he was tucking into a fish supper! Well, they certainly weren't expecting that.

And I have to say, I wasn't expecting such grace, such fun from the Lord, in the face of their unbelief and doubt. God looks at us, as we wrestle with our own doubts and worries and quietly says to us: *Peace!*

Peace be with you! And if this puzzles you, just wait until you see what I'm going to show you next! It'll blow your socks off?

Jesus 'opens the disciples' minds' and helps them at last to understand the full majesty and world-changing wonder of all that has happened through him, because of his death and his resurrection. He unveils the gospel they are to take to every nation on earth: that Messiah would suffer and rise again on the third day. That Jesus would now for ever be the open way to repentance and forgiveness for everyone: a way to leave past hurts and sins behind and to discover newness and healing in God's life giving love.

Then Jesus says this to his disciples: *You are witnesses of these things.*

In our reading from Acts we are invited to witness the transformation of these very disciples from those frightened, wondering, doubt-filled men into confident evangelists and preachers who KNOW why Jesus had to come, suffer and rise again. Peter even uses similar words to the words Jesus spoke when he came to the disciples in that room that day: he says: Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Jesus had said: Why are you troubled and filled with doubts? It's remarkable, this transformation, isn't it?

As they go about bringing healing and forgiveness and new patterns of living in Jesus name, we see they have lived up to Jesus call: *You are to be my witnesses.* Transformation indeed. Now they live out their lives for others in service and in love. Well, we should have expected that!

As we have mourned the death of Prince Philip this week, as we watched his funeral yesterday, I am sure many of us were moved by the slight figure of her majesty the Queen as she sat, alone, socially distanced, in Windsor Chapel. Prince Philip had been her rock, her consort, her faithful partner all through her long reign. Wherever she was, Prince Philip would be her support. Again and again, we have heard how his life was a life of service. It certainly hadn't turned out as he expected. He was well on his way to a long and distinguished naval career. Giving that up must have cost him dearly, but he gave it up to be of unflagging service to his wife, his queen.

We have also been told many times in the past days how important Prince Philip's faith was to him, and that his life of service grew out of his faith in God. At his funeral yesterday, he was held as a shining example of selfless service to others. An example to follow.

This has been a hard year for everyone. Our world has changed. Now, though things are moving slowly back towards freedom and normality, it feels like it's going to be a new normal. When will we be able to do such simple things as sing in church again? When will we be able to shake hands as we pass the peace? When will we be able to hug our family and our friends?

For some of us this has been a time of testing and our faith has emerged brighter and stronger. For many of us, the opposite is true. We are beset with questions, fears and anxieties.

But remember David's words on Easter morning: *While it was still dark...the resurrection had already happened.*

While we tussle with doubts and questions and puzzlement, Jesus stands in the middle of the living-room of our hearts and lives and says: peace be with you...don't be afraid...you are going to be my witnesses.

We can ask him to share his plans with us as we come to his table today. Let's recognise him in bread broken, wine outpoured. Let's remember him tucking in to that broiled fish with such a smile. Let's take a deep breath and open our hearts and minds to the unexpected truth that Jesus is in the mix and muddle of our everyday lives and he wants us to follow him into the 24/7 challenges of a post-Covid world. We are to be his witnesses: he is going to transform us in ways we never expected or could have imagined.

Let's get ready to be of service wherever, whenever, however.

A Prayer of Service:

Wild Spirit of the living God
Make me cool waters in someone else's parched land;
A sheltered place for the fallen;
A haven for the wounded;
A safe place for the frightened;
A highway for the wanderer;
A still place for the fugitive;
A home for the weary;
A strong place for the feeble
And a hill for the ones who want to see further.
Through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen

May the Peace of the Lord be with us all!