

Sermon – Sunday 5th May 2019 – 9.30 am

I wonder how you would rate your confidence? Perhaps you are a person who rarely has a sense of self-doubt; or perhaps you can tend to feel inadequate. Something we discussed in a course I attended before Easter was the fact that our confidence levels rise and fall in different circumstances. Some of you would take it in your stride if I asked you to come up and give a talk to the congregation, while others would run a mile. What about walking into a group of strangers? Is that something you do confidently, or something you can't stand? And what about a social event with friends and family? Each of us will feel more or less confident in these different situations.

Last Saturday morning the Women's Group had a talk from Isobel Penny who works for House of Colour and makes a career from advising people about the colours which suit them. As a friend of mine commented when I was telling her about the talk, "you took way too much of that in!" But to provide a brief summary, there are four basic colour groupings, which House of Colour has named after the seasons. During a consultation, you will find out which season of colours suits you best, and which colours among those work particularly well with your complexion. I think my favourite moment was when Isobel took a mustard yellow and showed that with one range of colours it looked quite classy, but with another it was like, as she described it, "a cheap duster".

What fascinated me more than the specifics of the colours, though, was Isobel's passion for what she does. She believes that wearing colours which suit us will increase our confidence and therefore improve our lives. Now let's be clear. For some people, wearing flattering clothes will make a big difference to their self-confidence, and for others it will be almost entirely irrelevant. And I really don't believe that God's love for us is dependent on what we look like – I think perhaps God finds the beauty in everything.

But the question of what gives us confidence and the ways our confidence grows is interesting. What I could see as Isobel spoke is that sometimes we might need to almost inhabit the space of being a confident person in order to understand what it feels like, and gain the benefits from feeling confident. And then we can find ourselves in that upward spiral situation. It can almost be that trying out what it would be like to be confident – to care about ourselves enough to choose nice clothes and dress well – can mean that we step out of our houses feeling different. Which will often result in people making positive comments – "you look great", "wow, what's different about you?" And perhaps then we can dare to believe it.

Just as each of us experience confidence differently, so it can be with faith. I am forever grateful that Jesus chose twelve disciples – not to mention all those other followers – because each of them responds differently to his call. We see the ways in which their personalities affect their responses and the decisions that they take. And not only do we see the differences. Even though there were only twelve named disciples, we actually know staggeringly little about most of them, suggesting that the ways some of them grew in faith may not have seemed particularly noteworthy. Yet, although our evidence is very limited, it seems that more than half of the twelve died as martyrs. It's safe to assume that faith was a significant part of their lives if they were prepared to die for it.

Stories like that of St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus can be somewhat daunting. A zealous persecutor of Christians, Paul has an encounter with Christ (after his resurrection and ascension) which convinces him that he has been wrong and transforms him into a believer in Jesus as Lord. The impact is so dramatic that thenceforth he travels widely, preaching, teaching and

setting up and supporting communities of early followers of Christ. It's probably fair to say that not all of us can attest to quite such a dramatic faith experience – though some of us may.

St. Peter may be a little easier to relate to, not least because we see his journey from the beginning. His personality drives him forward, saying things without thinking. And of course we are well aware of his failings – denying Jesus three times at the end of his life.

John, the beloved disciple, seems to experience his faith directly through his relationship with Jesus. There is a sense in which he is simply devoted to Jesus and this is the foundation for all he believes. We came across Thomas the twin last week, and know that his devotion has limits. That he is a man of questions, who wants to understand. For him there is an extent to which doubt is not the enemy of faith, but rather allows his faith to be a living and breathing experience of exploration and discovery.

You may recognise in your own faith similarities to one or more of the disciples – aspects of your own journey which are comparable. And even where our own experience has been entirely different, there are aspects of their experiences which can help us. One of the things I love about St. Paul is the way that he tells the story of his conversion. In Acts of the Apostles, we are told the story in chapter nine, and then it appears again in chapter twenty-two and twenty-six. On both of these latter two occasions, it is Paul telling the story to others. We may not have had experiences as dramatic as St. Paul, but something that helps all of us in our faith is telling our stories. Reminding ourselves of the foundations of our faith – the reasons we believe. At times telling our story will deepen our faith and at others we do it because we're almost trying to convince ourselves, but either way it's an important aspect of the way we practise our faith.

And while there may be similarities in the ways we experience faith and confidence, there is one crucial difference. The foundation of our faith is a God who loves us, and that means that we are never on our own in our search. In the resurrection appearances, Jesus shows time and again that he knows us, loves us and wants to draw us into faith and relationship. We are reminded time and again of the Last Supper – breaking bread together – encouraging us to do likewise, as we do as a community week after week. And it's not just bread, helping us to remember that we gain important nourishment from growing in relationship with God.

And there is that constant reminder that our individuality is recognised and cherished. When Thomas needs proof, Jesus provides it. And in the beautiful final section of this morning's gospel reading, he gently reminds Peter of his betrayal, and in doing so redeems it, commissioning him for his ministry.

Discipleship is a lifelong commitment, which will look different for each one of us. We worship a God who understands that, and longs for us to enter into a relationship that will enable us to grow in faith. We also worship a God who loves us even when things go wrong. The call from Jesus to each one of us is "follow me" – as you are, in anticipation that in following you will be transformed.

Amen