

10 February 2019

Preacher: James Pellow

Hymns: 73 “Fill thou my life, O Lord my God”
 564 “O thou who camest from above”
 663 “I, the Lord of sea and sky”
 504 “May the mind of Christ my Saviour”
 410 “Lord, your Church on earth is seeking”
 456 “And are we yet alive”
 608 “All praise to our redeeming Lord”

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8
 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
 Luke 5:1-11

“ORDINARY”

At the very beginning of this year, when I knew I was to be preaching today, I mentioned it in passing to a friend. Straight out, my friend said, light-heartedly, I think, “So, what’s the thrust of your argument going to be? What are you going to hit them with?”

Light-hearted or not, I had to tell him that just isn’t my style. Do I hear a collective sigh of relief? None of us is going to be walloped this morning, that’s a relief! And anyway, I dare not compete with today’s Old Testament lesson - *it is a stunner*. Powerful enough to wallop anyone. Whenever I hear a reader start with those words “In the year that King Uzziah died” I know what’s coming! That mind- boggling vision that Isaiah had:

“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up; the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.”

He goes on to describe how one of the seraphs flew over to him, with a live coal from the altar and touched his mouth with it.

Hard to picture, isn’t it? A big budget film maker might attempt it, but I suspect they’d only cheapen it. Yet, when all that dramatic imagery is done, with the burning coal

touching Isaiah's lips to indicate his cleansing, what we end up with is a question and an answer. Not a simple one, it's true, but a straightforward one with no frills:

"Who am I going to send to speak for me?" God asks. "Here am I, Lord" Isaiah says, "send me".

That was the great 8th century Hebrew prophet Isaiah, of course, despatched with a particular mission and a particular message. A mission and a message that survive to this day in the heavyweight book of Isaiah.

Now, I've called this sermon ORDINARY. Not a nice word – according to Katherine, anyway, and, thinking about it, I'm inclined to agree! By definition, ORDINARY means "Commonplace, standard, with no special distinctive features". Not exactly complimentary, is it?

I'm reminded of the status in the Royal Navy – Ordinary Seaman. Like an apprenticeship, I gather, after which you can be upgraded to Able Seaman.

What does that mean? He's an Ordinary Seaman – he's so ordinary – he's not very ABLE. Not exactly complimentary, is it? *But it's this morning's word.* ORDINARY.

I think to myself, what if Isaiah were to walk in here right now? Having just heard of the extraordinary calling he experienced, suddenly there's the man himself in front of me. I suppose I'd want to ask him first of all, "Was it really as dramatic as that?"

Whatever his answer might be, I suspect the conversation might fizzle out at that point. Looking at the great man himself, all the time he was speaking I'd be thinking **"How can I beef up my own Christian experience to compete with that?"** I'd have to admit to him, surely, that my calling was nothing like that. Now, do you think Isaiah might look at me piteously as if to say "oh dear, you're so ordinary, aren't you?" I should hope not, of course!

So, where do you and I fit in? How does that extraordinary, visionary calling of Isaiah equate with *my* ordinary calling to be a follower and a witness for Christ? What if I can't even *remember* how or when I first felt called to be a follower of Christ?

In order for Isaiah's vision to mean anything to me, other than a stunning piece of theatre, so far removed from *my* day to day experience, I find I have to strip it back to the essential core – and it's that question and answer. As I say, not a simple one, by any means, but a straightforward one:

Who am I going to send? Send me.

Or, "Who's going to represent me?" "I will".

To digress for a moment. February 10th is a date I will always associate with Joyce Grenfell, an actress who, for more than forty years has been one of my biggest and brightest inspirations. February 10th was her birthday and Joyce was best known for her skill at writing and performing monologues and here's my point. Joyce only had to put on a coat or a hat and in the simplest of settings – just a chair, perhaps, on a concert platform, she 'became' the character she had written and in your minds eye you could 'see' the other people she was talking to and the piece came alive in front of you. No technical wizardry, no sweeping scenes cape, no CGI, *just her*.

The first time I saw Joyce perform, in a television series in 1972, I was transfixed **by the seemingly ordinary yet powerful simplicity of her art**. And I still am.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that you only have to put on a hat or a coat, like Joyce Grenfell, to 'become' a witness for Christ. You have to work at it.

When Jesus called his first disciples to leave their fishing and to follow him and be his witnesses, aside from the miraculous haul of fish, there was something seemingly ordinary yet powerful in the simplicity of that calling. And in *their* 'ordinariness' too. But they had to work at it – getting their heads around all that Jesus was talking about was difficult enough.

So, let's hear it this morning for Ordinary Witnesses!

And here's a question. How does my relationship with Christ, day to day, translate into the ordinary witness I give, day to day?

As Jen put it last week, it's not the shrill voice, the voice that can shout the loudest that gets the job done most effectively. Certainly in the political turmoil we find ourselves in at the moment, I think I've had my fill of shrill and loud in recent times.

Do you remember the account in the first book of Kings, of God speaking to Elijah at Mount Horeb? Another great piece of Old Testament imagery:

"A great and mighty wind tore into the mountains and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a still small voice".

How do I witness for Christ? Do I shout, loud and shrill? There may be times when we need to make a point, when our voice needs to be heard - when we see injustice, perhaps. But, day by day, how do I witness for Christ.

Charles Wesley wrote a very powerful line in one of his hymns:

"Let me commend my saviour to you".

I think of that line often, especially when I'm considering a sermon. To me, it infers "I'm no whizz kid, I'm just me, I'm ordinary, but this is how Christ has changed my life, *is* changing my life, this is what he means to me."

Paul admitted in our second reading:

"I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain".

I'd hardly call the apostle Paul 'the least'. We can't all be Charles Wesley's, Pauls' or Isaiahs, but we can still be witnesses.

So, consider this morning the role of what I call the **passing-by witness**.

Over forty years ago, I remember hearing an interview with the actress and singer Ethel Waters. Later in her career she sang at Billy Graham crusades, you may recall. She spoke of the friendship and love shown her by the crusade team, describing, as she phrased it, the '**passing-by**' things they did for her, especially as she got older and her sight was failing. That's how she described it – the 'passing-by things'.

When I was very young, like a lot of us I had an 'honourary Aunt' – you know, no relation, but we called her Auntie Annie. I remember the occasion like it was yesterday. Auntie Annie was staying with us and she was in fragile health by then. This particular day, mum lost her grip on the kettle she was holding and the hot water ended up on the floor, and scalding mum's leg. And while mum's leg was attended to, Auntie Annie, frail as she was, threw a tea towel on the kitchen floor and mopped up the water with her foot. Sounds stupid, doesn't it – that I should remember that so vividly. It was only a **passing-by** thing, after all. Just an ordinary response, but a practical one, the one thing she *could* do in the emergency of that moment. I can see her today, doing it – so ordinary, but it's vivid in my memory even today.

Here's the question again. How does my relationship with Christ, day to day, translate into the ordinary, **passing-by** witness I give, day to day?

And as an ordinary – commonplace, standard, without any distinctive features – **passing by** witness for Christ, I *can* make a **persuasive** and **powerful** difference.

My Dad was unskilled and untrained in any profession, but he worked, until he retired, as a *jobbing gardener*. That's a phrase you might not hear a lot these days. It's a bit like 'ordinary' – it doesn't sound at all important, does it? It meant that he had a number of people on his list that he would visit once a week or so, to cut their

grass and weed their flowerbeds. In other words, perhaps, in light of the phrase I've been using, he was a '**passing by**' gardener, not a bona fide full time one, dear me, no, nothing like as important as that! – *yet each week he could make a difference in each place he visited.*

Now, cast your minds back. Some of us further than others, I know. Can you recall when someone did or said something, just in passing – an act of love, practical like my Auntie Annie, an encouraging word, a shoulder to cry on, an arm to lean on, a wise word of advice – even a word of correction, perhaps, that set you back on the road of faith after you'd wandered off – *something* they did or said *in passing* that you knew came from their ordinary faith experience but which was powerful enough to change you, and you remember it to this day. Thank God for all such Ordinary Witnesses!

And that's really all I wanted to say this morning. If your/my Christian experience seems ordinary, if we do that 'comparison shopping' thing when we come to church – well, of course, he/she is a much better Christian than me, *and vice versa*, lets encourage each other to go out there this week, not to make the loudest noise, not to wallop people with the Christian message, but to commend our Saviour to those we live and work with, by the passing-by things we say and do.

As we say at a baptismal service "With God's help we will".