

Easter Day 2021. Barrowden/Zoom.

Risk-taking.

Change.

The saintly Archbishop of Paris, preaching on Easter Day, recounted a story of 3 young lads who decided to annoy their local parish priest. In they went to the confessional, one after the other, no doubt telling whacky stories of imagined evil to their Father-in-God. As the last boy was about to leave the confessional the priest said to him, “For your penance, I want you to stand in the middle of the church, look up at the giant crucifix and say, ‘I know you died for me but I don’t care a damn’.” The boy went to the centre of the church, looked up at the crucifix and began the sentence but couldn’t finish it. “I know that story to be true said the archbishop. I was that boy.”

People change and Easter is all about change. Certainly this year, with the roadmap underway, we are very conscious that change is in the air. So it was when St. Luke tells this story (Acts 10. 34 – 43) about Peter being invited to a party at the house of Cornelius, the Roman centurion. Peter is the one who denied Christ 3 times at the trial but now he is a changed man; he has picked himself up out of despair. He is taken to the centurion’s house and dares to cross the threshold for it was forbidden for Jews to mingle with gentiles. No matter, Peter was on a mission and begins his speech by assuring Cornelius and his family that God shows no partiality. Christ is for them – for Romans – just as he was for Jews and anyone who wishes to know him.

Now the Acts of the Apostles is one of the most racy books in the bible. It is about the rapid spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, yes, but it is also written by St. Luke who has a strong interest in the outsider, the stranger, women, the poor. So this story of Cornelius is about a centurion and his family on which change is about to fall. He and his guests are about to begin life again as Christians.

Christ the Stranger.

Peter’s party speech in the house of Cornelius compresses many details in the life of Christ but he labours the point about the resurrection appearances. Christ appears not to all but to some who are chosen as witnesses: those who could give evidence about the Risen Lord. As we also know, those witnesses were not always sure of the evidence. Mary, at the empty tomb very early in the morning mistook Christ for the gardener, a stranger. The apostles, gathered together in the upper room with the doors locked where frightened rigid when Christ appeared among them. His appearance had changed though they recognized his wounds. Could this be the Risen Lord? They went on worship him in faith, *‘though some doubted’* as St. Matthew says. Then we have the couple on the road to Emmaus who only recognized Jesus when he said the blessing over the meal. EThey scampered back to tell their mates about The Risen Lord. Finally, the disciples return to their fishing habits, but who was this chap on the shore with helpful hints about fishing from the other side of the boat? Could that stranger be Jesus? Well, it was. He welcomes them ashore and cooks breakfast for them.

Taking Risks.

Someone has described the work of a priest as one who comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comforted. This adage could well be applied to The Acts of the Apostles.

Peter goes into the very heart of an alien family to talk about Jesus. Cornelius courts him but he could just as easily have crucified him. It was a risky visit. Of course, the world-changing encounter in Acts is between Stephen - who was arrested for his faith - and a stranger called Saul who stood and watched the stoning of Stephen. Later, he was contacted by those early Christians and his conversion to Christ gave added thrust to the work of evangelisation.

The Acts of the Apostles is full of such risks, people crossing boundaries for the sake of truth and joy and satisfaction. We need only think of the thousands last year who took a risk to take part in vaccine trials around the world, resulting in the most amazing progress in science and safety. Their risk resulted in our security. Such risk-taking allows us to break down barriers and this is just what happened in those early days of the church as it suddenly exploded in growth.

If this risk-taking is seen as part of church history only, then we are the most to be pitied. It has to be part of our church growth strategy too. It is so easy to do but requires an adjustment to our thinking. We have to shift our weight onto the front foot. Let me share a clear example with you. Last week, two of our churches – and probably their hard-working churchwardens – distributed Palm Crosses to every church-going family in the village. Commendable, yes. But why stop there? There will be other people in those villages just waiting for permission to interact with the community of faith but we don't allow it! We erect our own barriers then wring our hands about not growing the church!

Now I acknowledge that there is a slight risk of rejection but in our villages it is not likely to result in crucifixion. Christ died for those too who live beyond those doors which weren't visited!

When Peter visited Cornelius he was acutely aware of the risk to life and the danger of crossing cultural boundaries. But the man who denied Christ had been forgiven and was joyful in the presence of the Risen Lord. He was happy to take risks for Christ. We must stand with him. Amen.