

## Ways in to faith

Isa.6.1-8; 1 Cor.15-11; Luke 5.1-11

I wonder how much you can identify with the things we hear in the lessons today. We hear about an ecstatic vision in the Temple for Isaiah. He saw God's majesty in a way which was overwhelming for him.

And then we heard about the roots of St Paul's awareness of God - again of a vision of Christ, in the story of the journey to Damascus. He was blinded by meeting with the light of Christ.

The gospel told us about Simon Peter and his friends James and John. A chance meeting with a man on the lakeside becomes a moment of revelation when he tells them where they can fish successfully

So - do any of those happenings have real echoes for you? The answer may be yes, but the chances are no. It may be yes because there have always been, and always will be people who meet with God in what seem to others quite extraordinary ways. Some research years ago suggested that more than 60% of the population of this country claim to have had something 'strange' happen to them. Let me quote a 25 year old engineer:

*I had a series of very vivid dreams...Jesus took me down a set of very grand stairs, opened a very large door and guided me to a road which forked. One fork of the road was not signposted, and the other was signposted, and said 'Jesus'.*

However, having dreams and visions is not a common way into finding faith, despite the large numbers who have 'strange happenings'. I wonder if you can guess what the most common ways into faith are? Let me give you some possibilities, and you think if any of them apply to you.

|               |                             |
|---------------|-----------------------------|
| Family member | Evangelistic events         |
| Friend        | Bible,                      |
| Church events | Literature, drama and music |
| Clergy        | School                      |

Years ago, John Finney, then the Archbishops Advisor for Evangelism, and later Bishop of Pontefract, did a major piece of research, across all the denominations, asking over 500 people who had made a profession of faith (Baptism, Confirmation etc.) in the previous year, how they had found faith.

The results were quite startling, and have a great deal to teach us about how we are to engage in helping others to come to faith. Now that is not an optional task for us, but an essential. Jesus called people, like those fishermen, to go and catch others. The Christian faith is not an inward, but an outward looking thing. William Temple famously said that the Church is the only organisation which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. All our readings today are about people having a revelation of God, but they are also all about those people therefore feeling a sense of calling to go and share that vision with others. To go

back to the gospel - the fishermen needed to know how to use their energy effectively if they were to land the catch. The Christian church needs to learn how to do the same in the task of catching men and women for the kingdom. There is little point in fishing with the wrong nets on the wrong side of the boat. That is why the results of John Finney's research are so vital for us to grasp.

So can we return to that lists of possibilities I mentioned.

Family member   Friend   Church events   Clergy   Evangelistic events   Bible,  
Literature, drama and music   School

The Church has done quite a bit of wasting of energy in inappropriate fishing if these results are anything to go by. I can think for example of campaigns I have taken part in to provide everyone with a copy of the a Gospel. - the 'Call to the North' which started with Archbishop's Coggan's national call And indeed I recall talking to a man who was searching for faith who had talked to a neighbour, who was a Bishop. 'Just read the Bible' he was told. And it had not helped very much at all. We have to face the fact that although most of the people who had found faith *after* they had found faith were avid readers of the Bible, there were very very few for whom it was a strong factor in finding faith in the first place. Even less had found faith through church activities or evangelistic events. But you will be aware how much time and money has been poured into things like that in all sorts of ways - whether it is evangelistic campaigns like Billy Graham, or quite different sorts of parish missions conducted by monks. The story seems to be that they are not the way that people find faith, on the whole. Nor is Christian literature, or drama or music. All of these have helped *some* but not very many.

So what *has* been the way for them? By a process of elimination, you must be aware of the answer. It has been through *people*. Above all it has been through Christian friends. They are the main factor for over a quarter, and nearly three-quarters said they played an important supportive part. The other main group has been family members - particular so for men, interestingly, who have been challenged to faith by their wives or fiancées. When you add up those who really say - my faith stems primarily from my friends, my parents, my partner or my children, you account for all but a tiny percentage.

So that brings things back very powerfully to us. If we are to fulfil our calling, our revelation of God - and if we hadn't had some glimpse of God, I guess we wouldn't be in church. Then we have to accept the fact that it is down to all of us whether or not others who currently don't know God's love will find it. I would have justification in saying it is down to **you** rather than us - because another of the findings of the research is that clergy are not very frequently the *main* person through whom people find faith, although they are very frequently the main supporting factor. There is a sense in which we are never quite able to be alongside people in the way that lay people can be. So the main fishermen and women sit in pews, not in clergy stalls. And the fishing goes on in homes and clubs and offices, not in churches and Vicarages.

This process of being alongside people and sharing faith is *very slow*. The research showed that the average time from people first being interesting in finding out about what they believed to any act of commitment was four years.

These are the facts, not the theories. What we all have to do is work out what facts like these imply for the way we live and function as a Christian community. It is not about everyone preaching at their friends, it is about being aware that sharing faith, simply, naturally and without any pressure is how faith actually spreads. You don't catch cold by somebody forcing it on you - 'let me give you a cold'. You catch a cold by being with someone who has one. The research suggests clearly that people catch faith by being with people who have it.

That is what Isaiah, and Paul, and Simon Peter and his friends realised - you can't keep something as good as God to yourself. We have to realise it too.