

Readings : Luke 11 : 33-36 Joshua 1 : 1-9

We continue our series looking at values, specifically exploring what Jesus valued based around selected passages in Luke's gospel. So far we have looked at the importance of establishing right priorities, distinguishing between what is urgent and important in life. We have explored the value and significance of faith and last week we looked at compassion. Today we turn our attention to courage.

Here is a dictionary definition of courage :

'the mental or moral strength to confront and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty; bravery' (The New Penguin English Dictionary)

The word confront in that definition is not always a comfortable word and not one we necessarily want to confront! The natural inclination for some is to avoid a possible confrontation at all costs in any sphere of life - perhaps especially in relationships at work or at home or even in church! ...and so we can choose to opt for an easy life and not do or say anything and you have to say that the notion of 'keeping your head down' does have some merit! It can certainly mean a quieter life!

But true Christian discipleship doesn't appear to subscribe to this idea. Over the past couple of talks in this series although we have been looking at different values such as faith and compassion I think you also see examples of courage.

For instance, Jesus was impressed if you remember by the centurion's faith but he might also have been struck by the soldier's courage – in reaching out and working across the cultural divide and building such effective and fruitful relationships with the Jewish community. The kind of courageous work many modern day peace makers try to do in countries in the world experiencing conflict.

Similarly in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the 'shock' of this story to the original audience who were listening, was that it was a Samaritan who Jesus chooses to portray as helping the injured man – the Samaritans were hated by the Jewish people.

The religious professionals 'passed by' the wounded man but the Samaritan stopped and helped him. He took the risk or if you like had the courage to help – he didn't 'keep his head down' and 'pass by' in the way the religious professionals did for fear of losing their jobs because of associating with an 'unclean' man. It would have taken courage for them to stop but they seemed to lack this.

In our Old Testament reading we have the example of a man who you wouldn't easily blame if he had decided to 'keep his head down'. He had taken on the mantle of leadership from Moses and now faced the daunting task of leading the people into the promised land.

In my imagination I can picture Joshua sitting by the river Jordan thinking, 'Am I really going to do this?' – and clearly he was anxious and fearful because God spoke directly into Joshua's life and helped to stiffen his resolve: 'As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous....'

Interestingly we often only need courage when we are afraid, or face seemingly negative, difficult or overwhelming circumstances. Joshua could have felt overwhelmed by the leadership task he faced and at this point could have put his head down and crept away from the river bank. However he didn't and instead chose to confront those fears by trusting in God and in his word to him. 'Be strong and courageous' are the words God's says to Joshua.

In life today, what are the circumstances where we might need courage?

Well, there is probably quite a long list:

- When someone close to us dies
- When facing a serious illness
- When changes happen in life – perhaps a new job, or loss of job or even retirement
- When things happen to those you love but you can't doing anything to change the situation
- Facing old age

I am sure you could add to that list!

One of the ways that Jesus illustrates courage is by using the analogy of light.

In our short gospel reading from Luke this morning Jesus explains that no one after lighting a lamp puts it in a cellar, but on a lampstand so that those who come in will see the light.

And in Matthew's gospel Jesus describes to the disciples how they are 'the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.'

I can't imagine either the crowd or the disciples themselves feeling comfortable with the notion of being the 'light of the world' or putting themselves in a place of high visibility....putting their light on a lampstand.

We discover, I think refreshingly, a group of disciples who were ordinary people who got fearful and anxious, who grumbled, who had ups and downs – yet Jesus says to this group of disciples and to us 'you are the light of the world' - in other words you will need to be courageous.

Now of course the light Jesus is describing is not their light or ours - but is his, and his desire was for that light to shine through their lives and also ours. How does that work? How are we to be that light?

As I was thinking about this theme of courage and Jesus linking it with light my mind was drawn to the present East Window here in St Stephen's Church and which replaced the old East Window destroyed in the fire over 19 years ago.

I have been looking at the small book that was put together explaining how the East Window was designed.

Henry Haig who designed the window got his inspiration from Alcuin of York, a monk and a scholar who wrote:

'In word and in example let thy light shine in the black dark like the morning star'

A theme which is reflected in the window depicted by the contrasting light and darkness, the light is Christ, the light of the world. He invades/confronts the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Supremely that confrontation is revealed through Jesus' confronting the powers of darkness by the courage of his death on the cross.

The window is in part a testimony to courage. Stephen is the key to the whole design. The story is told in Acts 6 and 7 of how Stephen was arrested for testifying about Jesus, in the face of this showed enormous courage and was ultimately stoned to death. And at that moment the writer tells us Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit 'gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.' (Acts 7 :55)

That scene is depicted in the centre panel which shows Stephen's arms raised looking up to heaven and seeing the vision of Christ in all his glory.

And also in the top right of the window you discover three hunched figures representing the martyrs of every age.

In Canterbury Cathedral there is a Martyrs' Chapel commemorating the saints and martyrs of every age. Twelve men and women were selected from the many thousands who died in the 20th century – a century it has been asserted which had more Christian martyrs than any other century.

Martyrs such as Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others who chose to live by a different set of values especially where they saw the dignity and freedom of individuals being challenged or taken away.

A martyr is a witness and that is what Jesus calls us all to be, to be willing to speak up for the truth, the light that is within us.

When Jesus talks about us not hiding our light, he is in effect saying that God is not a secret to be kept, we are going public with this. One version of these words puts it this way

'If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I am going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I am putting you on a light stand. Now I have put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand shine! That takes courage!'

Being light in the world is probably not going to cost us our lives but it will sometimes cost us and understandably we can be fearful of that.

And interestingly fear is one of the words that crop up a lot in the Bible - the most often repeated command in the Bible is 'fear not', it occurs 365 times (I think!)

I remember reading an interesting newspaper article sometime ago written by a former editor of the 'Catholic Herald' (written before Christmas 2010) It was written in response to a call by a former Archbishop of Canterbury to encourage Christians that Christmas to wear their '**faith with pride**'

He explained how he 'found himself struggling with this notion of being out and out proud about being a Christian because he felt like many believers he had never been good about talking about God' and he explained he felt this was probably because his own religious beliefs didn't stretch to easy definitions of the divine – but in the end felt that it was a half hearted excuse for not doing what the gospel demands unambiguously of all Christians – in other words to go public – to shine.

Finding appropriate ways to share our faith is not always easy, we rightly need to be sensitive to people and not be pushy yet we are called to be light and perhaps to be less 'shy about our faith'. Yet sometimes all God is asking of us is to share our story – there will be a power in your story, because it is the story of what God has done and is doing in your life.

There will be those times and situations where God is asking us to speak up – maybe to talk about our faith, but perhaps to speak up about an injustice or to speak up for someone who cannot speak up for themselves. But none of this requires us to be super saints or indeed super human, just to trust that God will be with us..and he will, because in those moments we are not hiding our light!

Which leads me on to say one other thing about light and that is **transparency**.

Our other parish saint (if I can put it that way!) is Aidan, who was an Irish monk and lived in the 7th century – his life was marked by authenticity, simplicity and holiness – he has been described as a man with an infectious holiness, which far from making him other worldly, enabled him to mix with all kinds of people

and to understand their world. I suspect people were drawn to him because of his transparency – a life lived open to God.

Being authentic, transparent is about being ourselves, not trying to be something we are not but being open to God in both our strengths and weaknesses and it is often in our weakness where we will see God's grace and his light shining through.

And if the light of Jesus is to shine through us as a church community, we need to be real and where we can be honest with each other. I have remained struck by a comment made by one Homegroup during the course of this series about the importance of having conversations with each other about our spiritual lives as well as discussing practical church matters. To do this certainly takes courage and resolve but it is through our openness and vulnerability that the light of Jesus so often shines.