

I was sitting on a long bus ride to Ealing on Thursday, and as I passed Park Royal an advert caught my eye it read "It's summer. You're thirsty. We've got sales targets¹." I was taken by the directness – you have a problem, we have a problem – lets solve each other's! Having said that it didn't cause me to run out and buy the drink it was advertising but it has caused me to think a lot about how we talk about Christianity and whether we have the same confidence.

I was speaking with a colleague during the week who had sent a draft order of service to a family for a memorial service who had then removed all of the Priest bits. The family had asked for a Christian memorial and my colleague was at a loss to know how to respond – how do we respond when people ask for Christianity but don't want it to be Christian!

Later in the week I had a conversation with a stranger who said *'what would you say to someone who said they had lost their faith – it is hard after all not to be suspicious of any organised religion in this day and age.'*

It was an interesting question. The thing that struck me though was the focus on 'our generations' that in this time the questions are greater than another. We may have greater access to questions globally or even the issues but I don't think this makes our questions or struggles any less or more.

The conversation led on with the other person saying – *well of course in the past people were simpler* – I am not sure that this is true either – I do think that our willingness to believe has lessened – we do seem to believe that we have a right to know and judge everything! But the reality is we don't need to know – and often not knowing is better for us in all sorts of ways. Why does faith have to mean simple, but it does mean – get on with it!

The thing which caught my attention in the advert about thirst was – it encouraged us to stop thinking about if it is right, if we can control it, if we understand it – all good questions at some points. But some things we just have to do or have to believe – that is what faith is. But faith is not only getting on with our relationship with God, it is also recognising our humanity within God and responding in compassion and love.

In our Gospel today Jesus sees one woman's humanity and allows her to be included in the community once again. She is not the first of those who Jesus draws in, nor was she the last.

This weekend we celebrate the 90th birthday of Queen Elizabeth. The Queen is a remarkable women of faith, who despite all that she has seen in her 90 years of life has not let go of her belief or faith in God. The Queen says she has a simple faith but

¹ <http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/youre-thirsty-weve-sales-targets-says-oasis-summer-campaign-launch/1353975#Ev1xkpxZjDrgA9zX.99>

in fact it is lived out in compassion and love. (it is a collection of the Queens' 2-minute slots – so to speak)

To mark her 90th birthday, the bible society published a beautiful little book about her faith in God and how she attempts to reflect this in her interactions with people. It may be easy to dismiss this the Queen at times with all that is represented in our media – but in light of this weekend and of our gospel today, I think the Queen demonstrates to us a confidence in our faith which we might all aspire too.

In the forward to the little book the Queen says “I have been – and remain – very grateful to you for your prayers and to God for his steadfast love. I have indeed seen his faithfulness,” she then goes on to make reference to the changes she has seen during her long life as the longest-reigning monarch in British history.

“The extent and pace of change has been truly remarkable,” she said. “We have witnessed triumphs and tragedies.” She then goes on to say that the world is now experiencing “terrible suffering on an unprecedented scale.”²

Of all the stories of the Queens faith, and of her compassionate heart I have heard however I have to admit to being very touched by a story during the week that emerged from Desert Island Discs.³ I want to read you part of that story...

David Nott, consultant who volunteers with Medecins Sans Frontieres and the International Committee of the Red Cross, was having lunch at Buckingham Palace in 2014 ten days after returning from Aleppo in Syria where he had treated war victims.

The vascular and war surgeon found himself struggling to open up to the Queen about his experiences in warzones, where he was working in hospitals that were being shelled and treating adult and children with severe injuries.

At dinner, Nott was sitting next to the Queen. In due course she turned to him and said ‘I understand you have just returned from Aleppo’

“I didn’t know what to say to her. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to speak to her. I just couldn’t. I could not say anything,” Nott

“She picked all this up. She said shall I help you. I thought how on earth could the Queen help me?”

“All of a sudden the courtiers brought the corgis and the corgis went underneath the table.

² <https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/landing/servantqueen/>

³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/david-nott-war-surgeon-the-queen-bbc-radio-4-desert-island-discs-trauma-aleppo-corgis-a7066511.html>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07djzyq>

She went to one of the courtiers and she said 'Can we open up that please?' and so she opened up this lid and there were a load of biscuits.

"And so she got one of the biscuits and she broke it in two and said 'Okay, why don't we feed the dogs?'.

"And so for 20 minutes during this lunch the Queen and I fed the dogs. She did it because she knew that I was so seriously traumatised. You know the humanity of what she was doing was unbelievable."⁵

Recognising the humanity, the brokenness of the situation and responding with love is at the heart of the Christian faith. When we see God in others, we also see the humanity within each other. This is not just our joys, but the parts of our story which have left scars and need healing. The path to healing is about noticing the pain and also allowing for forgiveness – of the situation, of ourselves and accepting – God's forgiveness.

In 2011 the Queen put it this way...

Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves – from our recklessness or our greed. God sent into the world a unique person – neither philosopher or general – but a saviour, with power to forgive.

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love.⁶

At the centre of today's gospel is this theme of forgiveness of sin and the authority of Christ! It is a very powerful and dramatic reading!! At the centre of our story is a woman who is excluded, who is aware of her humanity. Within the context she is unclean – and yet she is aware of Jesus ministry. Jesus, unlike many others of his time, did not exclude women or children from being his disciples – Luke more than any of the other gospel writers is at great pains to communicate this.

Luke however doesn't record how this woman knows Jesus, only that in some way she has been influenced by him and his teaching. Jesus and the disciples are at dinner in the house of Simon, and the woman enters – weeping and anointing Jesus feet. She has the courage of her convictions and this is a strange act in any culture or context. Jesus notices and allows this to happen – though at no point does he

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36455715>

⁶ P 42- The Servant Queen Bible Society 2016

challenge her or ask – rather he allows it to happen – to allow her humanity to shine through. It is Simon that Jesus addresses and challenges⁷.

Just so we are clear – this coming of a weeping stranger into a dinner party and washing the guest feet uninvited - in Jesus day is as strange as it would be if someone came into a dinner party at your house now!

But regardless of how unusual it is – Jesus makes it clear that her behaviour is appropriate – she wants to express her gratitude and love for Jesus – and Jesus wants her to know that in God’s Kingdom she is never excluded – and he wants to make a space for her story to be told, so that she might know she is whole again.

We are a people of faith – we know what forgiveness means – we have experienced God’s love. We don’t need an excuse to share it – or live it – but we do need to make space for the stories to be heard – especially whose that need healing.

And maybe this weekend – as we listen and share in the Queens’ celebrations, we can take time to learn from her example of faith and do the same.

Amen.

⁷ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1680