

How do we know what we know?

I was alarmed this morning to hear that 20% of British people do not believe the Holocaust took place – how is it possible that we can deny an historical fact, but so often we do – we are selective in our remembering.

But when I was this thinking of this question earlier in the week I was thinking not of those things that people choose to deny, but rather how we learn or understand important information.

When I was a child I remember in either year 4 or 5 making a diorama of the universe, we had to put the planets in order from the sun, the earth being between Venus and Mars.

On Tuesday night, I was listening to late night radio trying to unwind after coming home from the induction of the new Priest at Stonebridge. Instead of nodding off I found myself totally awake and listening to what was on. I had always assumed, based on my lessons in year 4, that Mars was the closest planet to earth, but actually it turns out that asking which planet is the closest to Earth is actually something of a trick question – the closest planet to Earth can change depending on the day, month, or even year. This relates to where each of the planets is in the cycle of its rotation around the sun. The program went on to say that the planet most often closest to the earth is in fact Mercury.

This was new information to me, and I found it intriguing. There are so many things that we learn as fact or off by heart, that as we get older turn out to expand or even not quite be as we remember, or as we were taught.

So often this happens when we try to sum up what we consider important information in a small amount of words. Sometimes trying to sum up an idea means we leave out the essence of its complexity. This can happen in science, and it also happens a lot in religion. The breadth of what we are trying to understand can often be greater than what we convey.

Today's Gospel reading from Luke records Jesus' first public act, which is not an act at all but a sermon.

If you could choose the words that might encapsulate who you are, the only words that would communicate the essence of yourself, your life, your commitments, what would they be? When it comes to Luke, these few would be the choice words for Jesus. Our Gospel reading today is essentially Jesus' life, ministry, and purpose in a nutshell¹. It is not unlike a mnemonic to remember the order of the planets.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1558

This passage has one major role - it reveals who Jesus is, what Jesus will do, and for whom Jesus has come. This passage also sets out one of the major themes of Luke's Gospel which is that it is our purpose as Jesus followers is to live out, embody, and proclaim these principles of Jesus.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4: 18-19)

This is a message of justice and grace and one that we continue to work for. It is like the passage we heard from Nehemiah this morning as well – once the community heard the words Ezra read from the Torah and it was interpreted – the people had no choice but to live out those words. So it is also with hearing the words of the Gospel – we have no choice but to live it out – once you know you cannot unknow! but it does not mean that our life is then without contradictions – rather it may even mean that we are faced with more!

Some of you may well say – well of course we have a choice? Well at one level we have a choice to ignore – but once we have seen the possibility of justice in the Kingdom of God we cannot unsee it! Once our eyes are open, while we can close them, the vision of what we have seen is still there.

This is what Jesus means by proclamation – once you have seen the potential of justice and equality – how can you not speak out when it is present.

Every week in our worship we commit to this vision, in our prayers and in our worship. Each week when we come and hear the gospel proclaimed we commit to taking it with us and living it out each day – and sometimes that will come easily and sometimes the contradictions will overwhelm us.

There are times when we want faith to be simple, and sometimes it is – but it is also complex and sometimes it stretches us and can at times overwhelm us, especially when we are going through times of change and new learning.

When Jesus stood in the temple and read the scroll he challenged the understanding of a text which his listeners thought they knew and understood; but with and through Jesus they had to be open to hearing the words of Isaiah afresh, hearing the new direction that God was taking them. They weren't asked to let go of their faith, only to be open to the possibility of where it might now take them. It didn't deny the past; it built on it and expanded it.

The Gospel message today reminds us of the courage that is required as we gain new insights and wisdom.

Paul reminds us of this when he writes to the Corinthians. We often confuse unity with uniformity, because it is much easier to gather with people who are like ourselves than it is to reach across the divisions which mark our culture.²

Paul insists the church is intended to be a foretaste of the final vision of all things that God promises, Paul calls the church to start acting that way. Thus diversity within the church is not a problem to be avoided, solved, or managed, but a gift of God's grace and a sign of the Spirit at work. The differing gifts of the Spirit form us in such a way that we do, and indeed must, belong to one another.

And with the gifts of this spirit will come new insights and new learnings. These gifts help us all the work together as one body, using the different abilities and passions that are gifts from God to us. It doesn't undo what we have known before, hopefully it just helps us move forward.

As a community, nation and congregation we are facing a lot of changes in the coming months and years. There is our national uncertainty with the ongoing debate about how and when Brexit will be a reality. This gives for many a sense of stress and unease. This is also played out within our community, often in the form of anxiety with others, or concerns about safety.

As a congregation we are preparing for the retirement of Fr Laurence, and the changes that will bring. This is not just that we will have one member of staff less, but the loss of a familiar friend and colleague who has been part of the story of this community for 15 years.

But change does not undo who we have been in the past, or all that has been achieved, though it may shape how we are in the future.

When Jesus stood to read the scroll, he did this because of his history as well as his future. He had been raised by his earthly parents to know how to read the passage, to be welcomed with the Synagogue. He understood who he was in a way that allowed him to use his gifts as a preacher and teacher to share this information. He had strength and courage to build on the existing knowledge and help it move forward.

Likewise, some years later when Paul writes to the Corinthians about the gifts which God has given them and how they are drawn to be one body, but not the same person or body part. Paul doesn't do this with no prior knowledge, he is building on what has been known and experienced, to help the new communities of faith move forward.

This is also the case for us as we face changes individually and as a community. We do not come at change without a history. We start with what we already know, with what we have already achieved and can celebrate, which for us as a church is that

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2733

we know how to be a community, which has faced change before and not only survived but thrived! But like the Corinthians, and those in the temple we need to be open to hearing that there may be more to our story than what we thought we knew.

Paul reminds that we are one body together, with different roles to fill, and one of those roles is to care and support one another as we assimilate new information, context and situations when things change.

The gift of Jesus message however is that we are never in this alone. And that whatever the contradictions of our faith and our lives, whatever new directions we might take, whatever new understandings we might gain, we will experience and come to know the grace of God through the courage of living and responding each day with the gifts God has given us.

It is this which will sustain and inspire us as we continue to be the body of Christ.
Amen