Acts 4v32-35 John 20v19-31 St Ma y’s Sunday 7 April 2024

Have you seen the poster advertising a gym on the wall at the space in front of the Islington Business Design Centre, next to the Hilton Hotel? It is a classic Before and After image. There are two pictures. A small one depicts an overweight flabby sad man. A much larger one shows the same man after just 12 weeks in the gym. He is smiling broadly, he is well toned with bulging muscles. The word Transformation is emblazoned on the poster.

We find a similar Before and After effect in the two passages that Chik read to us today. On the evening of the resurrection, the disciples gathered together behind locked doors, because they are afraid of the Jews. The next Sunday, even after all of them, except for Thomas, have seen the risen Jesus, they are still meeting behind closed doors. Fast forward just a few weeks to the account in Acts chapter 4 and we find the disciples boldly speaking in public about the resurrection of Jesus. What happened? How could such a band of uneducated, frightened and sceptical people switch from being in hiding to openly controlling the news of the day in Jerusalem. It was an extraordinary transformation.

This transformation is one of the main reasons that I have confidence in the story that Jesus rose from the dead. People in the first century were just as likely as sceptical, secular twenty first century people to doubt that somebody could rise from the dead. The disciples were initially astounded and fearful when they heard from the women that they had seen the risen Jesus, but their transformation was not a flash in the pan. Fuelled by the bold preaching of the disciples, the gospel moved peacefully and rapidly from Israel in all directions, all the way around the Mediterranean and east towards Iran, and south towards India.

In recent months there have been Christians from Kerala in the South of India worshipping with us. Their tradition tells us that the gospel was taken by Thomas to their part of the world in the year AD52. Many of the disciples were to follow their Lord in suffering and dying for the Good News of Jesus that he died and rose again. How could they continue to testify to such an unlikely event as the resurrection of Jesus unless they had seen it for their own eyes?

What happen to change these men? Very simply the disciples saw the risen Lord Jesus. His body was very different from a normal human body. He could eat and drink and be touched, but he could move through locked doors. There was something about him that caused his friends not to recognise him at first. The resurrection of Jesus was a completely new event. It was a one-off and very different from the raising of Lazarus.

The story that the disciples told in the early days was propelled by the news of the resurrection. The story was to develop in the decades and centuries to come as it faced questioning over time and from a range of different cultures.

However amazing were the deeds done by the early church, such transformation is not just for the first century. On Easter Monday there was the first of a new series called Café Hope on BBC Radio 4 at 8.45am. It lasts just 15 minutes and is presented by Rachel Burden, who explains it is a virtual café where people tell about the things they have done that have made a huge difference for others. Last Monday, Stef Jones told how he had been a successful advertising executive, who had a happy marriage and a lovely family. Something told him there was more to life than work and family. He happened to meet two old University friends who were Christians. This led him to attending a local church in Clapham where he became a Christian. At the age of 50 the understood that he was the centre of his life. Becoming a Christian transformed his perspective.

His church provided support to prisoners in Brixton prison. They ran a Christian service and mentored some of the prisoners. Stef said he didn’t do much at the start other than make tea and coffee, but slowly got more involved. He became troubled at the difficulties ex-offenders had in finding jobs after they left prison, which led to a high rate of reoffending. He could not think how he could help the ex-prisoners find a job. One day, speaking with a friend, whilst playing golf, he learned that the Metropolitan Police have hundreds of abandoned and stolen bikes in storage. Stef had the idea of asking the police to give them bikes and to set up classes in bicycle maintenance. He correctly foresaw the big increase in cycling in London, which would increase the demand for bike mechanics. So, he set up a charity called Exo Bikes which has transformed the lives of ex-offenders. Of the 38 guys who have been trained so far only 2 are back in prison at the current time. Stef’s own life was transformed by becoming a Christian. He said it was his faith that fuelled his ideas, gave him the energy and the gumption to keep going with the project. He realised that life is not about himself, it is about other people and this gave him a deep sense of joy. What an amazing story to hear especially on our secular sceptical Radio 4. Helen and I were moved to tears as we heard the story. You can hear it on BBC Sounds Radio 4 8.45am on Easter Monday.

What transformed the disciples and transformed the life of Stef Jones was meeting with Jesus. Jesus brought peace, joy, forgiveness of sins and crucially the Holy Spirit into all their lives. They all experienced a personal transformation, because of the reality of Jesus in their lives. The reading from Acts tells of the extraordinary community of Christians in Jerusalem. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, everything they owned was held in common.

We have to understand that the early church in Jerusalem was a close-knit community with kinship ties, as well as friendship. There had always been a strong emphasis in Judaism of a small community supporting one another. Perhaps the Holy Spirit moved in this way because the fragile new community needed very strong mutual support to grow, given the resistance from both the religious and Roman authorities. Christian communities have been formed over the centuries. There is an understandable desire to replicate the acts of the early church, so exciting were the times, but the Holy Spirit, more often than not, works in new ways rather than replicating the old ways.

The radical lifestyle of this early Christian community is alluring and challenging, whilst at the same time impractical in today’s world, but Acts 4v32-35 is not a blueprint for some kind of Christian Communism. However, it is certainly a challenge that we meet the needs of our own Christian community and beyond. God’s Holy Spirit will help us meet the needs of others. But first the Holy Spirit brings each of us the peace and the joy and the forgiveness of sin that Jesus brought to the disciples as he met them in the room behind the locked doors. He brought peace to the life of Stef Jones and met the feeling that was eating away that there must be something more to life. The Holy Spirit gave Stef joy as he provided genuine opportunities for ex-offenders and saw lives being transformed by Exo Bikes.

The Holy Spirit can do the same in our lives. Peace and joy and freedom from guilt are such amazing gifts. God longs that we all experience those gifts in our daily lives. When we are open to God and the working of the Holy Spirit those gifts can be real for us. The trouble is that, like Thomas, we can be sceptical when hear about the good things that God wants to give to humanity. We resist the prompting of the Holy Spirit, perhaps because we think it is too good to be true or we are frightened of the consequences. This can be true whether we are still wondering about the claims of Christianity, are new to faith or actually have been a Christian for a long time. The message of the gospel is that whether we are new to faith, whether we have lost our way with God, or even whether we are close to God, he will surprise us with new and good things. God wants us to have peace in our lives. He wants us to experience joy in our lives.

It seems to me that there are signs that the Holy Spirit is working in our church of St Mary’s. More people are worshipping each Sunday. Some people are coming to know Jesus for themselves. The congregation is getting younger. How will God continue to work in our church and in our community in the months and years to come? Let us be expectant and trusting and look forward to God working amongst us.

What happens to us as a community is of course important, but every community is made up of individuals. The Holy Spirit inspired the apostle Thomas to take the Good News of Jesus to India within 20 years of Jesus’ resurrection. The Holy Spirit inspired Stef Jones to realise that life is not about himself, it is about other people. Will he inspire each one of us to do something new, something that will serve others, something that will build up St Mary’s? Could it be serving tea or coffee after the service? Could it be helping with children or young people? Could it be something outside the church? God loves for us to take risks. He longs for us to take time to listen to his Holy Spirit. I hope and pray that God will work amongst us in this way. It is a sure path to joy and peace.