

St Brandon's 20.5.17; Easter 6  
Acts 17. 22-31; 1 Peter 3. 13-22; John 14. 15-21  
A Reason for the Hope

Rick Simpson

## INTRODUCTION: Why?

Do you own a car?

If I asked you why you bought the last car you did, I bet you could tell me why. Something to do with size, price, the mileage you do, whether it needs to look pretty or manage bad roads, the colour, economy, safety. You'll have weighed it all up, and know the reasons for THAT car. If not, one might think: "Wow – you'd just buy any old car? More money than sense!"

Anyone?

What's your car and why did you buy it?

And your last holiday: if I asked you why you went where you did? Because you are intrepid and like to explore, you like train journeys, or you hate flying, you like to be active, or wanted to do nothing for a bit, you like camping or 5-star hotels, you'd always wanted to go there, you go there often, you like cities or mountains, to be with other people or by yourselves – and, again, price, value, maybe safety too. I bet you know why you plumped for *that* trip.

Anyone tell us why you took your last trip?

But if I asked you why you are here ... or, actually, if you come regularly, and you believe in God, if I asked you why you do, would you be as clear about the reasons for that as for your fortnight in France or your Fiat 500?

## 1. CHRISTIANS AND LEARNING

Well you might ... or you might not, and I suspect not everyone would feel entirely confident if I asked you to nip to the microphone now and briefly set out the reasons why you believe.

Yet that is what Peter the ex-fisherman wrote to Christians in a number of churches around 60 AD:

“Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you.”

Other translations say, “Always be ready give an account of the reasons for the hope within you.”

In other words, why did you buy that car, I mean, why do you buy, why do you believe in the Christian faith?

Now, as I say, you might be quite ready, and happy, to do that, but many of us are not. Yet it might be important. No, let me try again: it is important, and is getting more so.

Peter wrote to Christians facing increased persecution, and they needed to be ready to explain that they were not nutters, but would not worship the Emperor, and were nor cannibals (“eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood” sounded very dodgy to other people in their time).

Now, we are Christians living in a time where religion is increasingly suspected as potentially dangerous, maybe irrational, almost certainly odd, at best quaint. For our own sakes, and if we want others to consider this faith that is dear to us for themselves, we may need to be better at giving reasons for the hope within us.

## **2. NOT!**

Many of us find this difficult, or think it must surely be someone else's job ... perhaps mine (as vicar)!

Why do we find it hard? There are lots of reasons.

But it's not because we're daft. We're not. All of us know quite a lot about some things – some know a lot about a lot of things. We've held down different jobs, learned skills, trades, professions. Many of us also have some real knowledge, even expertise, in interests and hobbies that have nothing to do with paid work. Yet when it comes to talking about faith, many of us feel out of our depth. How come we can function at really high levels of skill and knowledge in a whole range of areas, but – perhaps – not in this area of the things we believe most deeply and dearly about God, life, the universe and everything?

That's kind of odd, isn't it? Why might it be?

Well, one reason is that for a long time a lot of churches have not set themselves up well to help grown-ups like us keep on learning. The clue's in the name: if we went to church as children, we often went to Sunday ... School. There's teaching, discussion; it's geared for learning - there. Then, after that, we just go to church, without any clear expectation we'll necessarily go on learning at all, and working out how faith works for us when we aren't 14 any longer, but 22, 33, 55, 71.

Can you imagine if in your work or your hobbies you only knew now what you knew the day you left school? It wouldn't be good, would it? We've gone on learning in these areas.

But have we gone on learning about our faith? Have churches we've belonged to helped us do that? Often not, I fear. We left Sunday School, and then what? The risk is it looks like you

graduate from school, you leave; you do Sunday School, get confirmed, and ... leave ... or you do stay, but the chances to go on learning about faith and how we make sense of everyday life as Christians may be few.

Now, we've talked about this a bit here at St Brandon's. Three years ago we did some work on what we're strong on as a church, and not so strong on – and it was the area of ongoing learning, and the deepening of our faith that came up as our biggest need.

So, the current Shared Ministry Development Team talked with lots of people here about what kind of groups or events they'd be willing to come to, to learn and grow. One of the most common answers we got was: *not really a discussion group or Bible study, because I feel like I don't know a lot of things about faith, and so I'd feel exposed, embarrassed in a group.*

That's totally understandable. Totally. But also a bit of a Catch-22: we feel we don't know loads of things about faith, and so we're so cautious about talking about it; but because of that we're wary of going to groups where we might learn more! Problem!

So the SMDT have tried a range of things to help us think more about faith – discussions of sermons after church where we try to make it as safe, non-scary as possible; groups using films about Jesus; prayer stations.

### **3. GIVING REASONS**

They seem to have gone well, but I think there's more to do. If the Christian faith is going to survive and thrive in Britain – and there's no guarantee of that – I believe we Christian people are going to have to get better at being able to give reasons for the

hope that is within us, in ways that make sense to people around us.

St Paul was brilliant at it. In our first reading, he arrived in Athens, walked around, and found ways to connect Christianity with what his hearers understood.

“I see you have a statue to an unknown god: I think I know who that might be!”

Many people then and now were searching for God: Paul connected their search with the God who had found him.

Or, “Hey, one of your Athens poets says there must be a God, and he must be so ... everywhere that in him we live, move, have our very being, exist. Yes – that is right, and this God has now made himself known more clearly in the resurrection of Jesus.”

If we’d read to the end of Acts 17, we’d have heard that the Athenians then talked with Paul. Some decided he was, indeed, nuts. But others said, “We’d like to hear you talk about this some more.” Fantastic. Great result. That is the conversation he needed, we need to be having with people who don’t yet share our faith, if the church is going to survive, grow and thrive.

To do that, I think we’ll need to be able to talk about the questions people have – and we often have ourselves – about faith. What are they?

.... (*space for answers*) ....

How about these:

- Why do people suffer?
- Does prayer work?
- Does religion lead to war?
- Does God exist?
- Could Jesus have risen from the dead?
- Do we have any hope beyond our death – could we rise too?
- Does science disprove God, like Richard Dawkins thinks it does?
- Did life happen by chance, or was it created?

You know, there are really good Christian responses to all those questions. Not final *answers*, not proofs – but really good responses, which show it's not irrational to believe, and that faith can be and often is a powerful force for good in our world. But many of us are not hearing, reading or discussing these things. And I wonder if we need to, if we are going to get more confident about being able to give a reason for the hope that is within us.

I recently read a book by a Christian who is a scientist and a theologian, called Alister McGrath. He took Richard Dawkins' attacks on Christianity to pieces, and made a strong case that it is Dawkins – not the believers Dawkins attacks – who makes unproven claims, whose case is weak, often inconsistent. McGrath gives persuasive reasons for the hope he has, and a good defence – just as Peter says we need to – of the faith. Many of us would be scared to talk about science and our faith. But we don't need to be, perhaps, if we got a little help from our friends.

## **4. HOW**

How could we grow in confidence in being able to speak of our faith?

Some of us are readers. There are great books on understanding, deepening, and defending our faith. There's a huge amount on the web, and some is good. Some is awful! But do we read things that help us inhabit our faith more comfortably, help us understand it better?

Not all of us are great readers. Maybe we'd be willing to learn a bit more in a church setting – hearing some input about these issues, with questions after?? Maybe. I'd be really interested to hear what people think.

## **CONCLUSION:**

But somehow I think we need to go on learning and growing, and I think many churches have not helped us do this. But we are moving into a time when it matters more.

Most churches are shrinking; some more will die; ours is gradually growing. For us and others to keep growing, more of us do need to be more comfortable about being able to chat with neighbours, family and friends about why we have bought these beliefs, why they matter to us. We don't have to have all the answers, which isn't possible anyway; we certainly don't need to be arrogant or pushy – always give your reasons *with gentleness*, said Peter.

But I think we need to grow towards being able to talk about belief, and why we believe, with the same comfort that we might if we were chatting about how we grow our flowers or

vegetables, or cook our favourite foods, or discuss the novels we read, the films we watch, the jobs we do, the holidays we've made, the cars we drive.

*Always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you.*

Are you ready?

May God give us grace to grow in this faith he has given us and share it well. Amen.