

Tuesday 10th November Simon Venn Walking on Water (Fleshing out the Word)

Good morning, folks.

A lot has changed in my life since I broke my leg back in 2016. While I was mending my dear friend Martin Bryce came to me saying he wanted to “complete my education” while I was laid up. And he's a wise old bird! He loaned me a book of poetry by George Herbert which has been a real joy to me, another beautiful book about the history of Christian art, called *Painting the Word* by John Drury, and one more called *The Right to Live* by Max Plowman, which speaks about God from the trenches of the First World War.

Today, I'm reading one called the new man by Maurice Nicholl. His vocabulary frequently has me reaching for Google. But his perceptions of human nature and his interaction with God, are both simple, and yet deeply challenging.

I've been learning from Martin since that first day, and my view of life and closeness to God have been greatly helped by him. But it was *seeing him in worship 30 years ago*, loving God with his arms in the air that *made my first and deepest impression of him*. And he's still the same today. He's not just a man who knows *about God*, but one who *truly loves Him*, and knows *that love returned*, and I'm doing my best to follow in his footsteps.

Recently, I've been struck by something profound, and yet very simple. In ‘The new man’, here's a statement that really lights me up. He says:

“Because the kingdom of heaven is within a man, he can only get contact with it internally. The way is within himself, not outside. He can experience flashes of another consciousness, moments of entire new meaning. But to reach that level permanently, he must first be taught the Word externally through his senses. Then he must hear it with his mind, and think about its meaning, and take it into his inner consciousness, and see himself in the terms of what it teaches.” (Now Jesus did say “The kingdom of God is within you”.)

So... we can learn by reading the book, by hearing it preached, by seeing it demonstrated in the lives of others. Biographies of past saints and testimonies of today. *But all this is external* and something more and different needs to happen within us.

When Mary lived through the amazing experience of carrying and giving birth to the Son of God, and all that happened to her around that period, he says, Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2v19. And we need to be like her as we enter the kingdom of God. Pondering is a rich, old fashioned word full of meaning, thinking about it, allowing your mind to be challenged by it, and deliberately lining yourself up with the word of God, grows its into your heart.

In Romans 12, Paul tells us “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”. J B Phillips said, “Let God remould your mind from within”.

We live among sheep in Motcombe, for most of the year. They seem to spend half their life eating, and then they sit down and chew it over and they grow. They have found the answer to life, and they don't even know it! Ruminantion is good for the soul.

We can take all sorts of information in at a superficial level, and let it pass through our minds leaving little deposit. A bit like seeing life through the window of a train. But *pondering the truth of God*, deliberately *stepping off the roundabout* and asking Him to open it up to you, chewing it over and putting it into practice, changes you. As my old RSV tells me: “From one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, who is the spirit.” (2Cor 3:18)

So when you feel attracted to something new, ask, “Are you talking to me, Lord?” *Don't lose that moment*. If you can't stop right there, (and who can these days), then *dictate it to your phone* or *scribble it on a post it note*, *stick it on the fridge*, and then make time to *step off the roundabout* and have a drink and a biscuit

and let it grow. It's your conscious decision to engage with it, that opens the way for God to build His truth into your life. *He gives us the clues, but the doing belongs to you and me.*

That day Moses turned aside to look at a burning bush and asked "Is that You talking to me Lord?" He began a process that freed a whole nation from slavery. God caught his attention, the rest was up to him. *Don't miss the moments that could change the world.* Confucius once said, 'To *hear* is to forget, to *see* is to remember, but to *do* is to understand'. *Seeing the truth is one thing, living it is something else.*

When Jesus called his disciples, they started off as his friends, Mark, chapter 3 tells us; "He appointed 12, that they might be with Him, and that He might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:14). We don't know how long they spent just *being* with Him, *listening* to His teaching, *hearing* about His Father's kingdom, *seeing* lives transformed by His touch, *feeding thousands* with a handful of bread. Then one day, He asked them to go on ahead of Him, and *show and tell* what they had *seen and heard*.

It was in stepping out, carrying the conviction that Jesus truly was the Messiah, that confirmed their faith. They'd been there handing out the bread to feed the 5000 and that was amazing. But now, they were actually sharing the Bread of Life, telling them about the kingdom of God, praying for the sick, casting out demons, and they realised that all the life and love and power they had seen in Jesus was now operating in them. They were overwhelmed. The kingdom of God was within them! They came back saying: Master, it worked. Even the demons were subject to us in your name". (Luke 10v17). And what they found that day, changed them forever.

I remember the first time I told my friends that God had come into my life. It was the morning after I opened my heart to Him. As I spoke, the truth of my words flooded back into me so strongly, I was surprised by the power of my own experience. In my heart, God was saying, "yes that's right, boy, keep going". Jesus said, if you confess me before men, I will confess you before my Father in heaven. (Matt 10:32)

I spoke recently about the Word becoming Flesh, "He emptied Himself to become one of us". *God clothed in a man.* Now this is the other way around and I'm calling it *Fleshing out the Word.* When the disciples were on their first mission trip, we see the other side of the coin. *They were ordinary men, but living alongside the Son of God, they were changed by the daily wisdom and wonders of his life. They didn't understand it, but they couldn't turn away.* Later on, when others were pulling away from Jesus, He asked them "are you going as well". Peter replied, "Lord, to whom should we go, You have the words of eternal life". (John 6:68)

From that time on, the disciples were learning to walk by faith, they often stumbled, and Jesus would rescue them and pick up the pieces. "Master, we couldn't do it – just bring him to Me". And all the time He was talking to them about FAITH, like a grain of mustard seed growing into a tree. "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain move from here to there, and nothing will be impossible to you". (Matt 17:20)

They were putting into practice what they'd learned of Him and watching it grow. *It begins like walking on a tightrope, and it ends by walking on the sea.* Just look at this process in the life of Peter. When he barely knew who Jesus was, a fishing miracle nearly swamps his boat. It completely blows Peter's mind, and he cowers away saying, "Depart from me, Lord, I'm a sinful man". (Luke 5:8) *He sees the glory of God in Jesus and he's condemned by the darkness in himself.*

A little later, Jesus is actually in Peter's house and *he sees the love of God* running alongside that *power*, as his mother in law is instantly healed when Jesus holds her hand. *He's caught by the kindness of God,* and he starts to become a fisher of men. *They couldn't get enough of Him* in those days, *they left everything to follow him. They hung on His words, they were amazed by His power.* They'd never seen anything like it. *They didn't understand it* and most of what He said passed them by. *But they knew with increasing conviction that He was the answer the world was looking for,* coming from a completely different place than the power of Rome.

The first sermon I ever heard preached, the morning after I gave my heart to God, is one I will never forget. *Peter walked on the water*. Now he knew all about water, he was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee and they were in his boat in the *middle* of a storm in the *middle* of the night. Now, even from my slender experience from sailing small boats, *I can tell you the one thing you NEVER DO in the middle of a storm is GET OUT OF THE BOAT!* Then Jesus appeared, walking on the sea. Peter is astounded and yet he can see Jesus is more secure standing on the water, than he is clinging onto his boat and he calls out “Lord, let me come to you on the water”. And Jesus says the greatest one liner of all time, “Come!”. (Matt14v29). Peter steps out and with his eyes fixed on Jesus, he begins to walk, like a man on a tightrope, then he glances at the storm and sinks like a stone crying out “*LORD SAVED ME*”. *Jesus immediately reached out His hand and caught him* saying, “Oh, man of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got back in a boat, the wind ceased. I think Peter felt Jesus’ arm shaking as he pulled him up.

Do remember He's “anointed with the oil of joy beyond his fellows”. (Heb 1:9) He loves Peter, and all the wildness in him and he sees the funny side of the situation, ‘He’s started, but he can't finish’. *It's all to do with faith..* Peter sees the faith of Jesus standing there, he’s seen enough to expect the impossible. Walking on the sea is just one more impossible thing nobody can do. Then *Peter steps out of his known world, onto the power radiating from Jesus*, and takes two whole steps on Jesus’ faith, then down he goes! *But he did make a start* and he's two steps ahead of the rest of them.

Now our Christian faith begins as an external thing. All our responses come from what we know of life and that doesn't include things like walking on the sea. Our natural senses are our guide and at the beginning, life in the spirit is quite alien to us. We all start from there and it's only when we reach the end of our natural strength *and then step out, that the Holy Spirit comes in*. Peter got wet that day, and was the butt of a lot of jokes by the time they all got home. *But he learned something. He took two steps, and he's off on the journey of a lifetime...*

When Jesus tells the disciples, that at the moment of his arrest, they will all desert him, Peter responds, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death”. (Luke 22:33-34) But Jesus replied, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me”. *Now as a flesh and blood man*, Peter was utterly devoted to Jesus, he would do anything in his power to save Him. We have that image from the garden of Gethsemane, a fisherman with a sword, cutting off the servant’s ear. I guess he was aiming for his head. But *that* battle was not about flesh and blood, *it was a spiritual night in which no one could work. Satan laid his finger on the Son of God*. This was his hour and no man could withstand it.

Peter finds his resolve melting away when he's challenged, and three times declares angrily. “I don't know the man”. Then the rooster crowed and he went away and wept bitterly. *That night, he saw the gap between his heart and his flesh*. What he aspired to and what he actually did and *he was heartbroken by his own weakness... but his story doesn't end there*.

Then look at Peter at that moment after the resurrection, when Jesus stands on the beach early in the morning and calls to the fisherman, “Have you caught anything? Cast your net on the other side of the boat”. Suddenly his boat is nearly swamped by another massive catch of fish and they realise the man on the shore is Jesus. It's His style! Peter’s in the water in a moment, thrashing his way to the shore. All thoughts of his denial are behind him, all the fear that gripped him the first time, “Depart from me, Lord”, are overwhelmed with that *one great desire to be with Him again*. He can't wait to get back. And a new commissioning takes place that day, “Feed my sheep”.

Now look at him on the day of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples in the upper room. And we see Peter, not hiding away from the Jewish hierarchy or the Roman soldiers, but boldly declaring: “God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ’.(Acts2v36) When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the other apostles, brothers, what shall we do? And Peter replied, ‘Repent, and be baptised every one of you for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call.’ (Acts 2:37-39)

The spirit is moving in Peter, breaking through the shell of his flesh and blood fears. He must have surprised himself by the boldness that came out of his mouth and the effect it had on his hearers. 3000 were added to the church that day!

Finally, let's look at Peter healing that paralysed man on the steps of the temple. He says, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you. *In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth – walk!*" Taking him by the right hand he helped him up and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong, and he jumped to his feet". (Acts 3v6-8). *Just look at the progress in him. When the rooster crowed, Peter knew the weakness of his own flesh and blood. When they caught all those fish, he saw the power of God in his boat, and raced back to Jesus. When the Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, he felt the power of God pouring out of him, and he spoke, as he had never spoken before. And when he reached out his hand to that lame man, he knew the authority of God was within him. He said, I give you what I have, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth – walk! And as that man leaps to his feet, Peter knows that living within him is the all powerful word of God. He is a living demonstration of the promise of Jesus: "If a man loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and we will come and make our home with him". (John 14v23).*

This is how God saves the world, every one of us in our own way, is on the same journey as Peter. *It begins -by knowing what you can't do in your own strength. It invites you - to see the Spirit of God in Jesus, and reach out to receive Him for yourself. And it ends - by knowing the grace and power of God flowing out of your life, and watching the fruit grow and multiply, like ripples on a lake.*

God said to Adam "Rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the sky". But Adam lost the plot. Then Jesus appears as the second Adam saying, "A body you have prepared for Me, I have come to do Your will O God". And He lives on the earth in harmony with His father, demonstrating His rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and everything else, *fleshing out His Father's commission to Adam, with a love and grace in a way that amazes the world. And He leads the disciples into that way, knowing God as their Father, tasting the authority of heaven and feeding the world with His love and grace.*

In Peter, we see the progression: from seeing the awesome power of God, to feeling his love from a distance, to saying to that crippled man, "I give you what I have". This is 'fleshing out the word'. Paul shows us its final outcome in Ephesians, 4, "The body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ". (Eph 4:12-13)

It isn't that man *becomes* God, but that man is truly *at one with* God, just as Adam was at the beginning, and Jesus is today. This is what the whole world is waiting for ...'The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God'. (Rom 8v21) Through all the chaos and darkness of COVID and the corruption we're living in, *the kingdom of God grows brighter and brighter, every day. One by one, people are turning away from the darkness and looking for the light and...receiving love, forgiveness and a new spirit and a re-commissioning from God, to fulfil His wonderful plan. The old is going, the new is coming, until the world's bondage to death and decay is a thing of the past. "And the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14). He said it and He will do it! He started and He will finish! And so in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I say to you, have a good day.*

