

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 19th April 2020

John 20: 19 - 31

Even when we are presented with the evidence; even when the science is laid out before us, it is incredibly difficult to know what to do, what to believe, what approach to take, what decisions to make, what policies to create and to follow.

Ask any of today's world leaders, nearly all of whom would say that their approach to the crisis of the current pandemic is to follow the science, and they will also tell you that despite the evidence of science presented to them, the decisions they are having to make are far from straight forward. They are extremely difficult to take, require personal judgement, difficult choices, political calculation, and ultimately belief, hope and faith.

The truth is, it is impossible to follow the science; we can only ever be informed by science. For political leaders, policy is informed by science. Scientists advise, politicians decide, leaders lead.

In life in general, and in crises in particular whether global, national, or personal, at the end of the day, after we have taken advice, after we have seen the evidence, we are the ones who have to choose; to decide what it is we are going to do or not do. That is why looking around the world today not every world leader, not every country, has followed exactly the same policies in response to the pandemic. Different countries have done different things based on the same scientific evidence: different choices have been made; different decisions taken; different policies adopted, all based on the same evidence.

At the end of the day when it comes to decisions that you must make; you are the one who has to decide what you are going to do. Evidence helps you make that decision, but it can't make it for you. You have to decide what direction the evidence is pointing you in, and you must accept that others might disagree and do something different. When it comes to decision-making you need to listen to the evidence, learn from it, but then you need courage. You need faith in your own judgement. You need belief. If you have these things and you have listened to the evidence, then right or wrong you will know in your heart of hearts that you did your best; the decision you took was yours to take, and you took it.

"Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith."

Like today's world leaders, the disciples needed evidence in order to believe, in order to have hope, in order to decide what they were going to do next. They were together behind locked doors, afraid, doing nothing. They did nothing until they were presented with some evidence to base their decisions on. Jesus came to them, and they believed. And on the basis of that belief they chose to go out into the world, to tell the world about what they had seen, and about what they believed.

But, we do have to wonder just how much they believed despite the evidence that was laid before them. When they left the room they tried to convince a disciple, who hadn't been there, that they had seen Jesus. This first attempt at evangelism was a spectacular failure. Thomas could not have been more dismissive of his friends claims. "Unless I see ... I will not believe it." You have to wonder just how convincing evidence can be. If they who had seen the evidence didn't have the conviction to persuade their good friend Thomas, a follower of Jesus himself, to believe, then what chance have we of convincing anyone, we who have not seen what they saw, we who try to convince people who are not our best friends?

Thomas, like his friends, only believed when the evidence of the Resurrection, Jesus, appeared before his eyes. But, Jesus like all of us, knew that evidence is never enough. It only informs, advises, suggests. At the end of the day you need more than evidence, you need to decide what to do, you need to commit to a course of action, you need hope, trust, faith. 'Because you have seen me you have found faith. Happy are they who never saw me and yet have found faith.' That's all very well Thomas. You saw me and believed, but those who are going to be truly happy, really make a difference, will be those who are driven by faith.

If those words suggest that Jesus felt he had made his point, and that this would be the last time he would have to appear to them, he was wrong.

Immediately following this story about Thomas, we find Peter living back home in Galilee, and working back at his old job, fishing. Clearly, he was not happy to believe, with or without seeing. Peter's faith and life only changed when the evidence, Jesus himself, appeared on the beach while he was in a boat. "It is the Lord," he declared, but even then, it was not enough. Jesus had to wring from Peter a commitment. "Do you love me," he asked, three times. Only then did Peter's faith burn, did Peter truly believe. The evidence wasn't enough for Peter, he needed a kick up the rear. You need more than evidence if you are going to act and be happy.

In this pandemic crisis, the decisions that the world's political leaders are taking at the moment are based on evidence, but that evidence is only partial. Science knows a lot about this pandemic, but it does not know everything. Nevertheless, the world's governments have to make decisions that deeply affect all our lives. They can't wait until the science gives them all the evidence they need. They need to decide now. They need evidence, but they also need courage, good judgement, hope, faith, trust. Like Peter, they need also love. Happy are those world leaders who have not seen the pandemic reach them yet, but believe that they must act with courage and decisiveness - and love - now.

Having read the Gospel story, followed Jesus' life, lived through his crucifixion, in this Easter season the decision that we have to take about Jesus should be based on evidence – the evidence that we have read about in the Gospel, and heard about from others. But, that evidence is only partial. Jesus is not going to appear to us today as he appeared to the disciples back then.

It is faith in Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection; his ministry and message going to save you that will repair your relationships with God and others, give you hope when hope seems lost, peace when others are violent or aggressive, justice when others seek selfish advantage, generosity when others are bent on greed, love when others have no time for you, new life in all its fullness.

Where is your courage, where is your faith?

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.