

Our faith, the Christian faith, one deeply rooted in history, is founded, indeed relies upon eyewitness accounts. At the start of Luke's gospel he writes that his account was "handed on to us" Luke says "by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses"

"We declare to you... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands" St John says in his first letter; at the end of John's gospel a second hand or hands testifies that it was indeed written by an eyewitness. "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them," the gospel says "and we know that his testimony is true."

Several summer's ago, back when I was a mere stripling curate in Leigh on Sea I found myself, rather briefly in the somewhat unlikely rôle of 'have a go hero'. It was a rather 'blink and you'll miss it' event, for which I am retrospectively rather glad, God not having blessed me with huge amounts of natural fortitude. It was certainly nothing quite as impressive as singlehandedly beating off a jewellery heist armed only with a handbag and a fearsome blue rinse.

Anyway, it was a sleepy Sunday afternoon of the type that is peculiar to August, I was quietly setting up at St Margaret's, Leigh on Sea for the 5:30 mass. The server for that mass was just arriving in church when there was an almighty crash from the vestry. My first thought was that something large must have fallen over very noisily. Perhaps, I thought, St Margaret's sacristan had snuck into the sacristy without my noticing and had pulled a large box of votive lights on top of himself. He always was a bit of a drama queen. When another crash quickly came followed by some muttered curses of a type rarely heard in churches and then only from the mouths of bishops, I knew that something was afoot. I went into the sacristy to see a room full of broken glass and the silver hand bells in the firm grasp of a hand attached to a burly arm making their way out the window, no doubt intended for sale in some dingy pub back room for instant conversion into mind-altering substances. Without thinking, I grabbed the bells, and with the briefest of tussles the would-be thief was running away empty-handed. Then, of course, the shock came followed, I am happy to say, by the police.

Now I am recounting this tale not because it tells of brave deeds by noble priests: it doesn't. For some, this type of theft may be an almost daily occurrence and by far the most sensible thing would have been to have left the bells and not risk the possibility of provoking violence; additionally, the panes of glass the thief had broken would have been too small to get the bells out of anyway. But, I am recounting this tale because of what came next. What, the Police wanted to know, did the culprit

look like? Now, I have to say although I saw the person for perhaps a couple of seconds I couldn't honestly have said what he looked like; I certainly couldn't have recognised him again, at least not without some obvious clue like him having the sanctuary bells in his hand. But when our server started to describe what he thought the man looked like: such and such an age, vivid scar here, white t-shirt, jeans, small blue back-pack my mind instantly started painting the very same picture of our recent intruder. Of course that was what he looked like! But I had to be honest. While this was, I have to admit a highly plausible portrait of a bell thief, it was not what I had seen: I simply had not remembered what the man looked like.

Well you might be thinking that I am perhaps rather unobservant or the owner of an especially bad memory, but I'm fairly certain that I'm not. My powers of recall are no better nor worse than most. Our justice system lays so much emphasis on eyewitness testimony and yet I had experienced very vividly for myself, on just what shaky ground that foundation of our jurisprudence is. If, when you return home today, you were each to write an account of this Evensong, they would I am sure, agree about broad details- lovely people, fab choir, great sermon etc. But there may be discrepancies about the smaller things; how many were here, what exactly was said, what colour the organist's academic hood is etc. Each of us will tell a tale that is different, yet each of us has been present at the same event.

And here then we run across what should be a real snag, a real problem. Christianity is a faith based upon historical events, with sacred scriptures claiming eyewitness veracity: but if eyewitness reports are at best unreliable and at worst misleading, what sort of truth does our faith proclaim?

If we are to take our Scriptures literally, then we cannot expect to take them seriously. But if we step beyond historiography, beyond a mere sequence of events, there is more, much more, going on than a faith emerging from and reliant upon historical fact. And what is going on, that much, much more going on, is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit infused in the dynamic tradition of the Church; the Holy Spirit guiding our interpretation of the Scriptures; the Holy Spirit present and speaking to us in ways that rarely register when the Word is proclaimed; the Holy Spirit transforming the Mass from a mere meeting of humans into the intersection of earth and heaven: this is the guarantor of the veracity of the Christian faith.

This is not to deny the historical reality of our Scriptures, nor that some of them- Luke's Gospel / Acts, the Macabbean books are indeed conscious attempts to write

history. But this is not a Simon Schama of the Scriptures, it is not the history of brittle dry facts; it is dry bones soaked in the breath of the Spirit, fleshed out with pneumatic sinew and muscle; it is *real* history, history where the *real* facts are revealed, the hand of God, unseen and unseeable in mere human historiography is shown as the unique force behind events, the veil is drawn back and, albeit temporarily, we see things not through human eyes but divine ones; we can understand things as they really are; we see on the cross not a defeated man dying in utter shame and humiliation- we see Christ the King radiant in glory at the moment of his ultimate triumph.

Eyewitness evidence can be impressive enough- my eyes have seen the glory is a statement that will not be ignored -but in the end if it is not *our* eyes that have seen it is never enough. Like the festival-goers in John's gospel, we would see Jesus, we would sit down at table with him, listen to his teaching, be healed by him, stand at the foot of the cross, share the astonished joy of his resurrection, touch the wounds in his hand and his side. And it is in the life of the Spirit that we do all this and greater things than these: it is in the life of the Spirit that we meet our Saviour.