

MORE OR LESS

Perhaps you listen to the radio programme called “More or Less”. Frequently, many truths are revealed especially about those who use numbers for their own ends. Recent events have caused me to re-think a story about how statistics need not be used to make us all feel failures (no more so than at this particular time when so many decisions are being made which grossly affect our future). We know that our children and our children’s children are hardly sheltered from these effects. This is a story I heard long ago. I’m not being very true to the author whom I have long since forgotten. He may forgive me for modifying it for my own ends (should he ever recognise what I have done to his idea).

A certain vicar was very disappointed by his Annual Church Statistical Return about attendance. His Archdeacon implied in no uncertain terms, not only that it appeared he wasn’t doing his job but also if he didn’t buck up, his church would be closed. The poor man was filled with anxiety-not so much for himself but for the little congregation who were so loyal and faithful to their Lord. They had been there before his time, and now they still attended worship, singing heartily, praying fervently and paying their dues-just. One night, having said his prayers, the vicar went to bed and dreamt. He dreamt of all those who had gone before, whose “riches” of faith he had inherited when he was called to minister there. So many of them lay at peace in the churchyard but their presence was so real to his congregation. Their memory and all that they had done and been was such encouragement to his “people”, who had always said “ If they did it, so can we-their faith in Jesus is why we are here”.

So, when it came to filling in the service register the next Sunday, the vicar didn’t think any harm could come from including some of those who had been (and were!) to the 5 or 6 regulars. And in the following weeks, he added those who were present on the north side of the church, and then on the east-and the south and the west. They were all present in spirit- the invisible made visible, all part of the heavenly host, all worshipping, rejoicing in praying to their Lord with his flock.

When the statistical return was made, the Archdeacon was beside himself with joy-and bewilderment. How had this simple, ordinary parish priest achieved this immense percentage rise in congregation who all seemed to be thrilled by his praise. Perhaps the vicar had found the secret of evangelism. Please tell me so that I can tell the rest of the priests in the Diocese-even the Bishop and he can tell the House of Bishops at the next General Synod. Our Diocese will be the model for the future of the Church!

The vicar thought for a little while.....the game was up!!....and then replied (as the Holy Spirit gave him utterance)

“It’s all to do with that line in Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Chapter 12 v.3. It’s to do with the measure of faith. Here we don’t (can’t) judge it on worldly standards-numbers in pews, bums on seats. I have seen the true value of my faithful congregation in God’s eyes. And yes, I think we have been transformed. Our minds have been renewed because they have been faithful..... But, I don’t think I should tell you how or we all might think, Mr Archdeacon, more highly of ourselves than we should!!! “

The measure of faith cannot be judged by worldly standards. If it is, everyone’s true value in God’s eyes may be missed and we all become the losers. We might even find that our church has become hypocritical or manipulative. We can all be made to feel guilty (although all that’s been taken away, we believe, through the cross). But how much better to be encouraged in every aspect of our faith.

A Bishop once said to me that the poet-priest George Herbert and I would have much to talk about to one another. I had neither the wit nor he the time to explain what he meant, especially as there had been more than a note of criticism of my rather traditional view of priesthood. But I have discovered what he may have meant now, during this lockdown, as I have had time and the inclination- and some people have written some very helpful books on George. In the poem you know as the hymn "Teach me my God and King in all things thee to see" one expert has written:-

"nothing will make us any less than that which God values above everything else"

I find great encouragement in that even now! I pray that you do too!

In about 1630 George Herbert wrote:-

"For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told"

God reaches out to touch to you and me and the whole of his creation. As you are, perhaps, sitting quietly, prayerfully, at home, why should not believe that as the reason-more or less- to put good, acceptable, more perfect things into practice....even when you fail?

And fail, we all do. But, remember Peter?

There came an occasion in the rather pagan city of Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked about his identity. "Who do the people say I am?" The disciples respond "variously" just as they might today. "But, who do YOU say I am?"

Peter is the genius of the day!.....just for the moment.

"You are the Messiah
The Son of the Living God"

"Blessed are you, Simon. My Father in Heaven has revealed this to you". This is happiness indeed, far beyond his expectations!

Perhaps Jesus is even more (as the early church came to think, at times) but he cannot be less and brings grace and blessedness to us all.

For Peter, it is as though an enormous bell rings out in the heavens, reverberating, resounding, resonating so that the earth can hear-and we can too, even if there are times when we have to listen hard with a prayerful attitude as this, and many other things are revealed .

It is unclear by what Jesus really meant in the ensuing words, but we do need to be clear that WE are part of the Church built on the rock of faithfulness-not just little rocks (like a chip off the old block) but living stones (ready for building however He wants) as we become spiritual temples-safe strongholds and refuges for the world of today-just as God was of old.

.....which is rather where I began, I think (more or less) WE WILL BE MORE but NEVER LESS!

Consider George Herbert on what holds us together even when we fail as Peter surely did (by worldly standards) in spite of his moment of true understanding.

"Rise heart, the Lord is Risen, Sing His praise without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise with Him mayst rise!!"

Easter

Revd Chris Fletcher

