

I came across two, allegedly true, stories this week that were, I think, quite revealing. The first is a wake-up call to us preachers. It concerned the minister of a church in the West Midlands who had put hot-air hand dryers in the toilets of his church and after two weeks, took them out. Some puzzled person, writing the story obviously, asked him why to which he confessed that they worked fine but someone had scribbled on the dryer: "For a sample of this week's sermon, push the button."

The second true tale was entitled grave uncertainties and involved a personal recollection of a bagpiper who had recently been asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man with no family or friends. The service was to be at a cemetery some distance away. As he was not familiar with the area, he got lost and finally arrived, after asking for directions, an hour late. The funeral director and hearse were long gone. There were only the diggers left and they were eating lunch. He went to the side of the grave and looked down. The lid was partially covered with soil. "The diggers stared at me over their sandwiches," he wrote, "and I sensed their reproach that I had deserted this dead man in his final hour of need. I didn't know what to do so I started to play." The diggers looked quite startled at this. They put down their lunch, stood while the lone bagpiper played 'Amazing Grace' and started to weep. They wept and they all wept together. When he had finished he packed his pipes away and went to the car. "Though my head hung low, my heart was full," he wrote. As he opened his car door, he heard one of the workers say, "I never seen nothing like that before and I've been putting septic tanks in cemeteries for 20 years!" "Apparently," the bagpiper wrote, "I'm still lost!"

That is quite revealing to me because, strange as it may seem, I can empathise with this lost, lone bagpiper playing his lament to the septic tank. I too find myself a little lost at the moment. Although my faith in a living God is as strong, if not stronger than it has ever been, I am lost as to the direction it is taking me. Those of you who are keenly anticipating an inspiring sermon on today's theme of being expectant for the second coming will clearly be disappointed, partly because my words, this morning, are everything but inspiring and partly, because, for the second year running, on Advent Sunday, I am not focusing on the given theme.

Being a bit unsure and hesitant, all I really want to do is talk about bicycles and more accurately learning to ride one. Sad as I am one of the memorable events of my childhood is learning to ride a bicycle. I can vividly remember a snowy Christmas Day when I got my 'big' bike, the one without stabilisers and the time I had in our backyard. I remember sitting astride what seemed a large and unstable bike, while my father walked beside me holding onto the back of saddle so that I did not fall off. I can remember turning around and saying, "Don't let go, Dad," frightened that he would let go, only to find, he wasn't there, he was some distance back down the yard. I immediately panicked and fell off. But I had cracked it and soon I was riding the big, two wheeler, wondering why I had ever spent time with stabilisers and tricycles.

There is something about personal experience and discovery that changes our outlook on life. What we hear we tend to forget. What we see, we remember, but what we do, somehow, somewhere, tends to become part of our lives, even if that is falling off the bike in the process of learning to ride it. Doing, rather than hearing and seeing is, to

me, the essential ingredient of a strong and active faith. During Advent, I try to make opportunity for reflection on my faith, a timely exercise this year. Last year I used David Rhodes' book, 'the Advent Adventure' to help me and I now see many features and ideas surrounding the Christmas story in a different light. Last year I thought more intently about Luke's Gospel. As you read his Gospel you will know that he begins with that odd statement: 'Many other people have written this Christ story down, so I have decided to as well.'" If others had done so, why did Luke feel he wanted to do it all over again? Why repeat the exercise?

One clue may be in his opening words: 'I want to give the most careful and accurate account of what happened. This story is so important, so vital, it must be right.' But what does he mean? Did he imply that someone else had been getting it wrong? Maybe he did, in terms of focus, if not in content. For ten years Luke had spent accompanying Paul, hearing him speaking to established, almost exclusive, Christian groups, almost in a context of 'us and them', discouraging contact, let alone, integration with outsiders. He heard Paul preaching about the community of faith, about the Church being the body of Christ, about life on a 'human level' and on a 'spiritual level', about the 'shackles of mortality' and hope of eternal life. The 'us' are within the community of faith, the 'them' are languishing outside, liable to encounter the wrath, retribution and punishment of a judgmental God.

Luke writes differently. He writes after Paul, even though his Gospel comes before Paul's work in the Bible. And when you read his Gospel, it is very different. From the Christmas story onwards, it is inclusive, everyone is embraced - warmly and unconditionally by Jesus. Why else did Luke choose shepherds as the first people to hear the good news of Jesus' birth? The shepherds who lived a very basic existence on the hillsides had no way and probably no inclination to keep religious laws. They did not pray at the required times and they were not that hygienic. Although they had an important role in life they were often regarded as unclean and sinful. A grubby bunch of outcasts confronted by the massed angelic hosts of heaven! And Luke's Gospel goes on and on like this throughout. The music of Luke's Gospel is completely different. The images are inclusive. He describes, in contrast to Paul, a fellowship of Christ as an open and accessible friendship, not a religious group with controlled boundaries. Jesus Christ, in Luke's Gospel, from his story of Christmas onwards, reveals a touching, friendly, sharing, healing, loving God, who is busy living this life not aching for something better in the life to come.

Is this the complete reason as to why Luke wrote his Gospel? I don't think so and so I want to come back to my backyard bike ride. Luke could have, passively accepted others and be done with it. Dare I say that I think the Church sometimes seems to say to us: 'We have worked it all out, you just sit there and believe it! Better minds than you have painstakingly sorted all this complicated theology and doctrine out, often using fancy jargon. Just accept this is how our faith is and everything will be fine!'

But will it? We need to get on our bicycle and learn to ride it ourselves. Do we want to be part of a faith that is quiet, respectable, steady and safe - which may well be sterile, if not dead? If you do, do not read Luke's Gospel this Advent or this Christmas! In his Gospel Luke reveals a Christ born into danger and chaos, bursting with vitality and controversy, offering risk and adventure. You see, when I finally got up from falling off my bike, the backyard wasn't going to be big enough. Without

warning I was off, out of the gates and down the busy road. Out of Mum and Dad's sight and out of their control. I am sorry to say, a common hang-up of the Church, to me, is that it portrays comfort and safety, it wants Christmas and our faith to be safe.

If we are honest with ourselves, though, they are not. I return to my personal, lost self, empathising with the bagpiper, lamenting over a septic tank. Our adventure in faith is a dangerous one, if it is to be real. The Christmas story exposes risk: the risk of hearing things, if we hear them correctly, we don't want to hear, being led into discoveries about Jesus that will, in fact, endanger our lifestyle. I can say, I am unsure where my faith is taking me, and my life at the moment. I feel a bit lost and confused. Perhaps you are too.

I am conscious, this morning, of the person's feelings who graffitied on the hot-air dryer. I just want to say that as long as I stay on my tricycle in the backyard and the Christ-child stays on the Christmas card or in the verse of the Christmas carol everything will be safe. But that wasn't good enough for Luke. That is why he wrote his Gospel. He wanted to discover FOR HIMSELF what this Christ person is all about. And if I want to do the same, which I do, I will be taking a leap into the unknown this Advent, this Christmas. Are you ready to join me?