

Many people only think about Eric Liddell as ‘the man who wouldn’t run on Sunday’, about whom the Oscar winning movie ‘Chariots of Fire’ was made. He was known as the ‘Flying Scotsman’ and was the first of his country to win Gold during the 1924 Paris Olympics.

As a committed Christian Eric Liddell refused to race on Sunday and was forced to withdraw from the 100 metres, his best event. Instead, Liddell raced in the 400 metres and little was expected of him. As Liddell went to the starting blocks for the race, an American slipped a piece of paper in his hand with a quotation from 1 Samuel 2:30, "**Those who honour me I will honour.**" Liddell ran with that piece of paper in his hand and not only won the race but broke the existing world record with a time of 47.6 seconds.

Standing up for what we believe is not always easy, and can sometimes lead us into uncomfortable situations in our relationships and in our work. Eric Liddell is remembered for the way in which he stood firm in his conviction, that the Sabbath day should be kept as a day of rest.

Despite the discomfort – the criticism of other members of the Team and friends, the media attention. Eric Liddell stood firm

and ultimately gained the respect and admiration of those who criticised him.

The theme of our service today is “**The Gospel of Jesus will make you feel uncomfortable.**” In our Gospel reading Jesus warns us that following him, can bring strain to even the closest of relationships and lead to division within families – father against son; daughter against mother, mother in law against daughter in law and so on.

Taking the teaching and example of Jesus seriously and attempting to live out the Gospel in all that we do, is not always easy, and can lead us into uncomfortable situations.

Even before Jesus was born, he was making people feel uncomfortable...

The Angel Gabriel presented the Virgin Mary with one of the greatest personal challenges of all time. In response, Mary gave her own body to nurture and protect the baby Jesus, at great personal discomfort to become the Christ bearer.

Joseph, her fiancé, must have felt very uncomfortable at the news that Mary was pregnant – and yet, both, once they had come to understand that they were part of enabling God’s will to be done, accepted the challenge and the discomfort as the

means by which God was prompting them into action. Slowly, but surely, the Holy Spirit wakened them to the new roles that God had planned for them.

Jesus' birth made Herod and all Jerusalem very uncomfortable. A new king was not part of their plan. Herod's defiant resistance was a total rejection of the Gospel News.

When we are made uncomfortable by the Gospel, we can respond like Herod, or we can respond as Mary and Joseph did, together with many ordinary men and women through the generations who have allowed the Holy Spirit to work within their lives and lead them into being followers of Jesus.

Sometimes, then, the discomfort of the Gospel is about challenging us to take a new course in life, or about prompting us into action.

In the Gospels, we see that God loves each of us as individuals. Jesus meets us where we are, and usually at our point of deepest need. Sometimes, he cannot do this effectively without making us feel uncomfortable. Rather like a plant that has outgrown its pot and needs to be replanted.

Think of Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree – hiding amongst the leaves because of his own sense of embarrassment and shame at the way he had cheated others. Then, horror of horrors, Jesus spots him and invites himself to his house for tea.

However, embarrassing this situation must have been, it was necessary in order affirm Zacchaeus in God's forgiving love and set him back on the right course.

What about Simon Peter, feeling guilty and ashamed at the way in which he had denied even knowing Jesus, after his arrest? He felt uncomfortable and hurt when, following the resurrection, Jesus asked him three times "Simon, do you love me?" Again, this was Jesus way of cancelling out the guilt and restoring Simon Peter in his relationship with him.

Then there was Saul, on the road to Damascus, intent on destroying the Church. Literally stopped in his tracks by the Risen Christ, he was made to feel very uncomfortable – blinded for three days, he could do nothing else but pray and reflect – Through that process, God's Spirit transformed his heart and mind, empowering him to be one of the Greatest ambassadors of the Gospel.

Alongside these, and many other examples of the way in which God works through discomfort, there many occasions when we see Jesus reaching out in love and compassion to bring comfort in the most difficult and challenging of situations.

Wonderfully, Jesus knows when we need his presence to reassure us and help us to grow in our understanding of his love and the values of his Kingdom. Values, which at times seem to turn the values of the world upside down.

It is with acceptance and love, that Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman at the well – when any respectable Jew would have known only too well why she was at the well at midday alone. The response was amazing – someone on the fringe of social respectability, drew many others to come and see the man who had shown understanding and love.

It was with love and compassion that Jesus stopped to talk with the lepers on the road – an encounter that brought healing and wholeness beyond their imagining. Individuals and their families divided by the pain and suffering of illness were made whole again.

It was in love and respect that Jesus allowed his feet to be washed by Mary Magdalene, as a sign of her sorrow and desire to be restored through God's forgiveness. However, uncomfortable we might feel in our relationship with God, or with others – his love is always there, his heart is always willing to forgive and turn our discomfort into a greater understanding of his love for us.

As I begin this new chapter in my ministry here in Aylesford and journey with you during the weeks, months and years ahead, I hope that we will have comfortable relationship, growing out of the values that Christ calls us to live by – love, trust, forgiveness and peace.

However, if we do experience times of discomfort, I pray that together we will be open to God's Spirit, ready to discern what he might be saying to us, things that he might be calling us to change, new ways in which he might be challenging us to share his love in the wider community. Above all, I pray that through God's Spirit at work in and amongst, us, we will be channels of his love and peace in all the brokenness and discomfort of our world, so that many others may come to know and experience his power to transform and heal.

Lord, make me an instrument of your **peace**.

Where there is hatred, let me sow **love**,

Where there is injury, **pardon**

Where there is doubt, **faith**,

Where there is despair, **hope**,

Where there is darkness, **light**,

Where there is sadness, **joy**.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much

seek to be consoled as to console,

not so much to be understood as to understand,

not so much to be loved, as to love;

for it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to **eternal life**.