

Transcript – Week 6 Message from Bishop Richard

This time of isolation makes communication very difficult. We can talk at a distance and connect through social media in many ways, but it's no substitute for a face to face conversation. I'm conscious of that as I share with you through these videos. Real communication, requires a personal knowledge, a deep listening to understand rather than simply to respond.

So, with the aim of better understanding one another, I thought I would use this video simply to share something of my own Christian journey. I do this, not to make it a model that others should aspire to, but to show that even Bishops have a personal experience of faith, we don't just pontificate theologically from on high!

I was raised in a non-church going household. My parents are deeply moral and upright people, for which I am profoundly grateful. However, as far as I can recall, I attended church 4 times before I was 16: 2 weddings, and two scout parades, all mind-numbingly tedious. As a young teenager, full of the arrogance of youth, I slipped into that settled, supercilious atheism that's comes easily if you have no idea what Christian faith is really about. I assumed it was a load of rubbish, not because I'd given it any thought, but because my family didn't go to church and none of my friends had any faith to speak of. I have to confess, that in the impossibly ancient time when there were only 3 TV channels, I used to compose letters to the producers of religious TV suggesting they take the rubbish off so we could have some decent telly on Sunday evenings. Mercifully, I never sent them.

Back in 1977 my sister dragged me against my better judgement to a church youth group near her school. It took 6 months persuading, but eventually I pitched up at the youth club on a Saturday night. At the end someone stood up to advertise the young peoples' bible study the following day. I scoffed very loudly. What was it that started me on that journey of faith? Primarily, it was the lives of the people in the church. There was something about them, their demeanour, their kindness that spoke of something beyond mere British politeness. So, I started going to the youth group and because I was doing science A levels, investigating these outlandish things they were saying about a historic figure from 2000 years ago. The problem is, that when you do look into it you find it has remarkable intellectual credibility. The historic evidence for the gospel accounts and especially the resurrection of Jesus was compelling. But, perhaps more importantly, I was confronted week by week by people whose lives had clearly been changed by it.



I got to the point of intellectual conviction. I could say the creed largely without my fingers crossed behind my back. However, perceptive friends could see that I hadn't yet made the step of faith. This was particularly evident in my bad language. I could just about keep it under wraps for the hour or so of youth group but it quickly splurged out soon afterwards. I came eventually to the realisation that to be a Christian was not just to recite truths about God, it also required one to submit one's life to Christ. This faced me with a dilemma. On the one hand, I loved going to youth group; it was the heart of my social life. On the other, I thought that to continue going if I wasn't going to sign up completely was rather hypocritical.

I grappled with this dilemma for 24 hours. For some reason I had the nonsense in my mind that to make such a commitment would be to somehow lose one's individuality and become part of some mindless collective. Eventually, I gave in. As you would expect, as a trained professional, my submission prayer was eloquent and informed. In fact, it was a simple, "O alright then!" That was it.

It was a powerful moment for me. I know the time. It was 10.28 am on November 4th, 1978 and I was washing my grandmother's car. All I can say is that I had the most extraordinary, vivid experience of being filled with a power beyond myself. C.S Lewis' words in his autobiography, *Surprised by joy* captured it completely. It was like falling in love on steroids.

I remember two weeks later, reflecting back on the experience, and suddenly realising I hadn't sworn once in the previous fortnight. If you had known me then, you would realise that something truly miraculous had happened! Something had happened to begin changing me from the inside. I assure you this remains a work in progress. Many people don't have these dramatic experiences of God. Many have the privilege of a Christian upbringing and faith is something that slowly warms over time. But I suppose, for me, if you were heading in the wrong direction 180 degrees away from God, turning around is going to require a fairly dramatic application of the brakes. How I got to be ordained is another story for another time. But I continue to marvel quite why God in his love should call a spotty, foul mouthed, motorbiking oik to his service, but he did.

You need to know that background to understand how it informs my subsequent understanding of ministry. It informs evangelism, because I realise many people don't reject faith on the basis of knowledge but of ignorance. It informs apologetics, because I believe God has revealed himself definitively and uniquely in the person of Jesus. I believe the creed and I'm convinced that faith has no substance unless it really is true. It informs discipleship, because I believe that true discipleship involves submitting to the Lordship and direction of Jesus Christ. I think we can sometimes put people off faith, not because we demand too much but because we seem to demand too little. Jesus when he invited people to follow him



invited them to die to themselves and rise to new life, not explore spirituality or have faith as an accessory to fundamentally self-orientated experience. Finally, it informs how I understand the Church. Its not a loose affiliation of special interest groups, some vaguely connected to God, it's a community of believers where we help one another to become more like Jesus. In the end I started the journey to faith because I saw the life of Jesus fleshed out in individuals and a community. I believe our holiness and love remains the best way we present Christ to a broken and hurting world.