

Ascension of the Lord

“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ When Jesus had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.” Acts 1, 1-11



“You are witnesses of these things.” Luke 24, 46-53

We human beings are inclined to give special importance to the last words of people who have been dear to us. We reason that, because they are the person’s last words, that they contain a message that that person wanted to impress on us.

The parting words of Jesus to his disciples amount to a great act of faith and confidence in them. He doesn’t waste words on preliminaries like: “Now, I hope you will do this or that.” Nor does he launch into reminders: “Now, remember to look after so-and-so.” He doesn’t even say: “I want you to do such and such.” He merely says: “You are witnesses of these things.” and “You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth.” He leaves them in no doubt that witnessing involves action. And he assures them that they will be empowered to witness by the Holy Spirit. He doesn’t stipulate conditions and he doesn’t add “provisos”. Without fuss, he entrusts his life’s mission to those who have accompanied him, with a very clear vote of confidence that, with the help of the Spirit, they will succeed. And more two thousand years later, we and all the other successors of those first disciples are doing our bit, guided by the Spirit, towards making sure the witnessing continues.

Witness, in the scriptural sense, means translating what one has seen, heard and learned into practical ministry. In the context of Sunday’s reading from Luke, it means rolling up our sleeves and getting involved in furthering the work that Jesus began. And, if we are not quite sure about where to start, we need look no further for example and inspiration than the thousands of generous volunteers who make the Gospel understandable by giving of their time, energy and talent cooking and serving meals for the homeless or visiting shut-ins and those who are lonely or providing holiday camps for disadvantaged children and respite for their parents.

Of course, there have been the Dorothy Days and the Matt Talbots of this world who, after dragging themselves back from the brink of personal disaster, have turned their attention to others whose lives are without direction, meaning or hope, guiding them to reclaim their own worth and dignity and a purpose for living.

And then there are the giants like Mary MacKillop and Francis of Assisi whose courage and insight into the Gospel led them to witness to Jesus in a manner that has galvanised countless others to imitate them across the years.

In this context, I am reminded of a valiant, 16th century Yorkshire woman, Margaret Clitheroe who, following her conversion to Catholicism, was forced, with many others, to practise her faith in secret because of laws introduced by Henry VIII forbidding Catholics

from public religious practice. Margaret was arrested, imprisoned and formally charged after soldiers stormed into her house and discovered a tutor Margaret had hired teaching a group of Catholic children. The tutor escaped through a window, but the children were interrogated by the soldiers. One of the children folded under the pressure of the interrogation and revealed all the Clitheroe family secrets, including the location of a secret compartment in the house where bread, wine and vestments were hidden. As a consequence, Margaret and some of the family servants were arrested and charged with the crime of promoting Catholicism. When brought to trial, Margaret refused to enter a plea, stating that since she had committed no offence, there was no need for a trial. It seems that her real reason for avoiding a trial was to protect her family and servants by not having to be cross-examined about any of them. She was found guilty of the charges brought against her and cruelly tortured and executed.

The night before her death, she made a single final request: that her shoes be left to her 12 year-old daughter, Anne. No words were needed to explain that this action was an invitation to Anne to follow in her mother's footsteps.

The message she sent was clearly received by Anne and many others. Anne became a nun and the two boys in the family became priests. Moreover, Mary Ward who was to found the Loreto Sisters, took much of her inspiration from Margaret Clitheroe.

On a mountain overlooking Jerusalem, Jesus left us his "shoes". Are we courageous and generous enough to walk in them?