

Called to Witness

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[0 : 0 0] We are called to be witnesses. What does that actually look like? In the next few minutes, we're just going to explore what it looks like to be called as witnesses. And here in this morning's reading is one of those amazing, beautiful and powerful images that were given in the Bible of this amazing encounter between two disciples going up to the temple who have this encounter with this man who has been brought daily. Now, yet for some, you may think this is a miraculous thing that's happened. If I'm called to share my faith, if I'm called to witness, this could never happen to me. I'd like you to just open your minds this morning and think about how we actually witness and how we share our faith. And I'd like you to open your mind not to think, oh, you know, this is something for somebody who is super spiritual or who is probably on a different plane than I am in my Christian journey. But I'd like you to just watch this clip because sometimes I think we can try too hard. And I don't know about you, I've met some really cringy people the way they've tried to talk about Jesus. Maybe this resonates with you, the man in the library.

What is that? Hey, hey, you ever try listening to Christian music? Here, yeah, it's good. It's better.

Can I help you find anything?

No, but I know what you've been searching for your whole life. We all laugh because maybe it resonates for us because often I think sometimes when we're passionate about something, we are passionate about Jesus. We try too hard. And as I read the scripture this morning, I want us to be encouraged in how we can witness. And I've been reading, practicing the presence of God. And it was written by Brother Lawrence. Well, it was actually about Brother Lawrence. And it was written by a guy who put this all together, about a 17th century monk.

And what he used to do is he used to stand and do washing up. That's what he did. He just did washing up in a kitchen. And people came from all over just to be near him, to be alongside him, to hear what he had to say while he was practicing the presence of God, being himself in the everyday. And often I think there's something in this story this morning that resonated with me about being ourselves as we come to share our faith into that sense of God's presence. Perhaps that's why so much happens in kitchens.

[3 : 2 5] I don't know about you, but some of the greatest conversations I think we have are held in kitchens, because maybe that's a place where we relax and we're at home, and we can chat with people very openly. Be encouraged. Let's go back to the start, engage what the power and presence of the risen Lord can do in us and through us in this story this morning. Firstly, Peter and John, two disciples.

Now, only a short time before this happens, they have been, along with other disciples, they've been locked away in a room. They were locked away in a room. They thought that it was the end.

Jesus had been crucified. They'd gone away. They thought the end was coming. Peter had actually denied Christ. And so there was these two disillusioned people. But now we see in this picture this morning that their faith that their faith had been transformed because they had acknowledged the risen Christ, and now they were moving in the power of the Holy Spirit. And so here is this totally game-changing experience that they've had as they know, as they move towards the temple, that they have something of the gift of God to share with other people. Now, guys, I'm just going to talk to the guys here because it's Christmas coming. Okay? Now, guys, we know that we have to come up with that ultimate Christmas present, don't we? Now, I've been, a little tip for you. I follow Mandy around all year, and I listen, and I watch. Okay? And I'll wait for that moment when she'll go and say,

I really like this. And then I make a point of going back into the shop to get it, to wrap it, and hide it away. I have things in my wardrobe, I am no saint, that have been bought back in last March in April. Now, why do I do that? Because I know that on Christmas afternoon when we leave church, that there will be something absolutely amazing in this gift that I have to give. But just to see her receive that gift is something really special. It is no different from what the disciples are doing here this morning. They know that they have this amazing gift. Two men who know the blessing and the transformation that change can bring in sharing this gift, and they're about to share it.

They're on their way to pray. A little line in there, in the reads. Think of what they've been through. Did they jettison everything? Did they jettison their faith? Oh, dear. Oh, life's been really hard.

[6 : 16] God's been, oh, look, I was nearly, I've been living in this thing. We thought this was the end. No, they didn't. They are on their way to the temple. They are on their way. They haven't jettisoned anything at all. They are still secure in who they are. And they come across this man and faced with an opportunity. What a great opportunity that is. An opportunity that's been laid before them.

What can they do? Here we are. This man asks for money. But in their heart, they know that this is about survival rather than freedom. Because to give him money would just be survival for him.

They've got more. They want to give him freedom. And I think we need to think about that. Because often we can just go into survival mode. This is what we do. This is how we do it.

And this enough is enough. But actually, what they're saying is, actually, no, we have this gift. You see, my frustration often is, as a Christian and in some areas of life, is that we seek survival rather than freedom. Because we don't witness. And we're not called to witness as we should.

Peter and John, if they had money, I guess they'd have been tempted, like you and me, to, yeah, that's fine. Have a bit of money. We walk away. We've got a nice, warm, fuzzy feeling.

[7 : 44] We've done something good. Isn't that lovely? But no. It actually happened today that on this occasion, they were, had nothing at all. Silver and gold have I none. But what I have, I'd like to share with you. Now, in my terms, it goes something like this. I'm really sorry, pal. I haven't been to the cash point. But I have something I can share with you. I don't know whether anybody's ever been in that situation before. But this is where it gets exciting as witnesses, because we know what we have to share.

We know what we can share with everyone. And we know what a difference those chance opportunities will make to those people's lives that we are seeking to reach. Maybe you stood at the bus stop.

Maybe it's a grim Monday morning. Maybe you're just happening to smile at somebody. Maybe you've just smiled. You get onto the bus. And you happen to sit next to this person.

And they say, what sort of weekend have you had? Oh, it's been a lousy weekend. I'll tell you, it's been really awful. And they offload. You listen. You listen. And they just get off the bus. They say, thank you so much. Just in talking has made such a difference to my life. Chance opportunities that we can take if we are moving in the power and the spirit of God. You may think this is far off.

My own story was I had a mate called Ian. He was a good lad. I worked with him in the police for years. He wasn't a Christian. And Ian had witnessed a really traumatic accident. His colleague had been killed in front of him by a stolen car. The chance encounter and the opportunity was that on a lovely summer's July afternoon, we happened to bump into them at Croyd. They were camping for the weekend.

[9 : 40] We didn't know they were going to be there. His wife mentioned to Mandy. She said, Ian's never going to work again. He's going to be retired. He gets day terrors. He sees it again and again and again.

And he's just the shell of the person he was. Silver and gold have I none. I would love to have fixed the situation for him. But I can't fix it. But what happened was the fact that on that afternoon, and I would tell you, I wasn't one of my finest moments because I was about to bottle it.

Because Mandy said, I think you need to pray with Ian. And I thought, that's the last thing. I'm going to send him over the edge. You know, why is it when women have got so much more wisdom than men?

Doesn't it infuriate you? It's great. And on that afternoon, Mandy went and took the children back. I was stood there. And I must admit, I made my excuses. And then as I got up to leave, I felt a hand, a physical hand in my chest. And I turned to my friend Ian. I said, Ian, do you mind if I pray with you? And he said, I've been sat here for three hours hoping that you would. You see, God makes the opportunity. All we have to do is respond to it. I'd love to say I did a really grand prayer. I didn't do a grand prayer at all. I think it was something, Lord, I'd sense you knew you want to heal Ian today. Lord, would you come in the power of your Holy Spirit and heal him?

Amen. Oh, thanks, mate. That was great. Thanks for that. Off we went. Story ends the next day, we've come back to come to a wedding in Clevedon. And as we get home, it was before mobile phones, so you can see when it was. There's an answer machine from his wife saying, Clive, you need to contact us quickly. We're at home. Automatically, I think, as I like to divert things, as we all do, Mandy, why did you tell me to do that?

[11 : 42] Picked up the phone. She said, we're at home. Ian has been completely healed. He slept the night. He's woken up this morning. No more day terrors. He went back to see the GP and the police surgeon, and he was back at work two weeks later. Ian became a Christian. He was baptized. This story is very personal for me because I always think, and my line will be as Christians, as we are all called to be witnesses, we don't miss the opportunities. You see, I think we are in a place at the moment in our Christian journey as a church, that we are in a place of expectation in our discipleship, that there are people out there who need to know what we have, but are we sharing what they really want? You know? And so think about, I was on my way to the temple. I was on my way to work. I was on my way to school. I was on my way to go shopping. I was on my computer. The Lord doesn't limit the opportunities to witness to what we were called to do. Handing over a check, shaking somebody's hand and being in the paper isn't my style. I think what we're called to share is in the heavenlies.

And so this amazing opportunity that we've been given, some of the greatest acts of witness will never grace the pages of newspapers and new wine because it's about our everyday witness in the everyday. What we are called and we are all called. Nobody's exempt. If you're calling yourself a Christian, we are all called as witnesses to move in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John enter the temple then with the man who has just discovered freedom. Do they say, look what we've done? This man is jumping up and down. They don't need to. They see life in him and through him of what the Lord is doing. And many people can testify to that. Here I guess in our own lives of when we have tasted and seen and experienced that. Because actually that is the main thing we are called to witness and to share and bring people to Christ. I was thinking about this experience and presence and I was thinking about the things that basically is about our preference and not God's.

As you know, we are just about to become a single benefice. And I've just been confronted with a large box of paperwork from the old benefice to sift through. And in there, in many years ago, in the darkest hour of this church, when music nearly divided and got rid of God's presence in this church, church, there is a file of letters that were written by people. And it is the most ungraceful file that I've ever read. We need to practice the presence of God in sharing and caring for each other. And realizing on that day as Peter and John went up, it wasn't about them. This wasn't about them. This was about the kingdom for what they were called to do. You'll be glad to know I took every one of those letters and burnt them. Because that is history and that is where it believes belongs. But there is a new beginning. And you sense here, this is a new beginning, not only for them, but for this man, for the people that saw them. The man knew that there was something different about these two men that stopped. He looked at them, he waited, he didn't keep asking them for money. He just said to them, and they said, so when God would be not. But what we have, we can give you something. And we can share that with you. We can share Jesus with you. And that's what we're going to do. And that transformed his life into freedom. Opportunities are there for us. And I like this man's explanation. This is a man called Hugh Halter. I just listened to him on the internet the other day. And this is where I am.

Because I sense the more authentic we are of being ourselves in Christ, in Christ and us, that people will be drawn to us. That people will be drawn. And people will come to us and will journey with us into that place of acknowledgement and love and faith. And it's not rocket science.

We don't do it in our own strength. We don't do it in quirky ways by putting cards and diverting people. We are just ourselves. Listen to Hugh. I think this resonates with me a lot. I hope it resonates with you. It's been probably 15 years. I don't think I've ever really initiated a conversation unless somebody has already kind of initiated some curiosity with me. Even when you watch Jesus, he didn't really start a whole lot of conversations. It seemed like people actually went after him. And then even when they would ask him a question, he would just sort of deal with it very quickly. And then he would sort of back up. And it seemed like they couldn't keep from continuing to go at him. I found that's the same way in my life. People will ask a question about, you know, how come you and Cheryl don't seem to fight that much? And then I tell him that we do fight. But yeah, not as much as we used to. And then they ask, well, how? How do you not fight? And I remember one guy asked me that question. I said, Joe, for me to tell you that, I'd have to be really honest about my relationship with Jesus. And he said, that's why I asked you. And so at that point, then the conversation's supernatural because he's literally asked me to tell him about Jesus. A few months ago, I had a party at my house and we had a neighbor that was my wife's real estate agent, kind of head broker at our office and just a lot of friends hanging around. Some of his friends, some folks that were a part of our church, just kind of mingling together really well. And Matt came over and he just said, hey,

[18 : 02] Barry and I, that's his wife, were talking the other night and we just talked about how we don't have a whole lot to offer our kids. His kids were now, I think, six, seven and eight. And they must have been bringing up conversations about God. And he just said, I realized that I have nothing to offer them that actually goes, I think I might be spiritually bankrupt. And I said, well, you should work on that.

And he said, I'm trying to. And then we just went back to the party. And then it was probably four months later, just a few weeks ago that I actually walked into his real estate office and he looked a little bit sort of bummed out. And I said, what's up, Matt? And he goes, remember that spiritual bankruptcy thing I brought up? I said, yeah. And I said, you're not making a lot of headway on that?

And he goes, no. He goes, is there something that you could do to help me figure this out? And so, yeah, so we've been talking now about God pretty naturally. I think it was assumed that Christians would live such beautiful lives that people would actually go after them, knock on their door, call them, email them, whatever, to try to get some help with their life. So I just wait until people move towards us. And then I just speak openly and honestly as somebody that's just trying to figure it out too. So I'm not the answer man, but I am somebody that's trying to follow this real person that really makes a difference in absolutely everything in my life.

And so it's easy to talk about that part of Jesus. So what I'd like to do is just encourage us to do life with people. Just do life with people and live that beautiful life. And people will be drawn to us. People will ask us. People will be drawn to us because of who we are as we see in an axe church. The people will come because of the people that we are. I can't think of a better gift to introduce somebody to than to the power, presence, love, freedom, life-giving and healing power of God. You don't have to pass an exam.

You don't have to be a Christian that's a new Christian or a long-standing. You just have to be yourself in Christ, in Christ in you. You don't have to quote the catechism. I probably, I can't do that either. But you just need to be yourself. But I know what I am called and made to do and we are called is to witness in the same power that Peter and John did that day. The same power.

[20 : 47] And that is available to us. And in this season, people, when we can share Jesus in this season of invitation, the people are asking us about who is this person that came. What a great opportunity that's been laid before us. And maybe for those of us who have struggled, who think that it's somebody else's role to actually share their faith and to witness, to give us a fresh sense of God's presence in peace and being who we are and developing our deeper relationship with God to enable us to enable us not to miss the opportunities, to smile, to be open to people, to draw people to ourselves, that people will actually know what we're for rather than what we're against, which I think is a good message for today. Let's tell people what we're for rather than what we're against. And people will love it. People will love the gift. And when they find that gift, like us, they'll know. They'll know the moment. Let's seize the opportunities.