

FACT/HopeFrome 2017: 'Have we the courage?'

Graham Owen is shortly to be installed as Rural Dean for the Frome area, following Colin Alsbury's tenure of office for over six years. At the first midweek service in 2017 to be held at Trinity Church, Graham delivered the following sermon. It serves as a very apt 'word' for the whole Body of Christ in Frome and I hope it will encourage us to pray for Graham as he takes up his new role among us. John Samways (Chair, FACT)

Isaiah 53: 1 – 6; John 19: 16b – 22 (delivered 4.01.17 in Holy Trinity by Revd Graham Owen)

Last Thursday afternoon was cold, cold, achingly cold on the hard streets of the great metropolis of Leeds. The light was cold, and the sun was only briefly there and under sufferance. If he had a hat on then it was a woollen one and at three in the afternoon he was already wanting to blow on his hands and hurry back indoors to get warm again.

The air was heavy with the damp that lay upon it. The hoar frost had mostly lifted, but still there was a cold, damp sheen on tarmac, pavements and windows, and the frost seemed to be laughing at us: "Mark my words, as soon as that sun has run off I'll be back and freeze it all again."

Lesley and Katie pressed on, and I trailed behind through the pressing crowds of bargain hunters. It was all thick coats; hoods pulled down; ears plugged in to whatever was being fed through them, every arm carrying bags and bags and bags of brand new stuff, all faces grey and unsmiling with the cold, and here and there, a hand held out by a beggar sitting by his, or her, paper cup on the pavement and wrapped in a blanket and defeat.

I confess. I began to feel a little sad. Thousands upon thousands of people, and all in a hurry; nothing in their day but shopping? How many know anything of God, or the Good News of Jesus. 'I bet hardly any of them have been near a church this Christmas!'

And then, I confess, I began to feel cross with myself and with the outrageous pomposity of my thoughts. What about me? Am I not here for the same reason? What brings me to this place if it isn't shopping? And anyway, what gives me the right to assume anything about any one of all these people?

Perhaps that young woman is a carer both for children and an elderly mother and this is the only time she has to herself. Perhaps that young man walking alone with nothing in his hands is failing in his world and feeling alienated and lost. Are there not many young men who commit suicide in our society? Perhaps this older man, dragging on his cigarette, has just lost his life's partner and cannot think now of anything to do but go from one pub to another. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps – who am I to make assumptions about any stranger?

Much better to think with love of what may lie beneath the surface and though it is rightly not mine to know what is in each life, perhaps I could have the grace to see the image of God in each one, to see each one as a brother or sister in life and potentially also in the faith of Christ.

Just then, there came slowly towards us a man carrying heavy sandwich boards over his shoulders. Another assumption: is he advertising a restaurant or some such? I didn't look at what was being advertised as I was distracted by a group of four or five teenage boys close behind him and seeming to mock him.

But as he passed me my eyes met his tired eyes, and then, in that fleeting moment they had passed by. But I turned my head and saw what was written on the back face of his sandwich boards: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever".

I confess. I began to feel sad again. A Christian voice, a tiny vulnerable light, making such a weary way through thousands of shoppers, trying to sing the Lord's song in an alien land and with little more than mockery for a response. It was barely a moment, and then he, followed by his entourage of fools, disappeared into the crowd.

What does it mean to be Christ in the market place here, back home in Frome? How can we be most effective in meeting our desire to bring the Gospel to the thirty thousand people of this town and the surrounding villages where we're called to serve; in meeting the eyes of the people all around us, not with sadness but with the warm, loving eyes and heart of the Holy Spirit, with the joy flooding out from the Good News of Jesus?

The starting place must be prayer by which I mean an earnest seeking of guidance from the Lord as to how we can best be Jesus to all these people. Surely it is to be where the people actually are: on market days; at the leisure and health centres; at the football ground; at all the big local events. This is what HOPE Frome are already doing with the litter picking at the Frome Food Fest and the coffee van, but I wonder how can we augment that work and be Christ in the market place?

Sharing the love of Christ in Frome? Transforming Lives in 2017? What does that look like in practice?

I find I am thinking of that lovely stall we had in the Cheese and Grain just before Christmas, and that is one very good way forward. But there are lots of events in and around the town, lots of places where people gather and where, if should use our prayerful imaginations, we could find appropriate, sensitive ways of being available, approachable and relevant to the thousands of people all around us who may never otherwise come near us.

I do hope that as we go further into 2017, we will be fully engaged as the body of Christ in praying for our town, loving our town, and bringing the wonderful reality of Jesus to the people of our town in all their various states and conditions of life. Living and telling the story of Jesus, with love, here in Frome. Yes, let's do it.

I see again that unknown man with the sad eyes, lumbering his way through the crowd, bearing his burden of two pieces of wood strapped so securely across his shoulders. Mocked, ignored and now passed by. At least he has the courage to witness in the way that he feels called by God, and I wonder, do we, the family of God in Frome, have the same willingness to get out there this year?