

‘God’s power, God’s plan, and God’s presence’ – Sermon first preached at FUMC Palmetto by Dr Christine Hoffman on 30th March 2008

What makes people write things down? There are very many possible reasons. Sometimes, of course, we write things down so that we remember them. This may be a simple ‘to do’ list or a shopping list. We may write things down so that other people have the information. Eleven years ago one of my nieces asked her grandmother, my mother, to complete a specially printed book. It asked specific questions about all stages of her life and besides having lines for recording the answers to the questions it also had spaces for attaching photographs. It took my mother a long time to get going on this book for Amanda who at 30 was the oldest of my mum’s 9 grandchildren. She read me a number of the questions and she felt that her life was not very interesting. After all, she lived in the same town all her 81 years. She was born in one house, moved to another when she married, and then to another as her family grew. But I urged her to start this task mainly because Amanda has requested it but also because I thought the answers to the questions, which included feelings and thoughts and not just stark facts, would be far more interesting to us than she ever imagined. Once she had started the task, it then took her a long time to complete it. This was partly because she had to root out old photographs from not very well-organized collections but mainly because she had both rheumatoid and osteo-arthritis so severe that, even on powerful steroids for many years, hand-writing was painful and had to be done in small doses.

Eventually, she got it finished and sent off to Amanda. When I went to visit my mother in December 1997 she showed me the book before sending it off. It was a very nice piece of work. We also made copies of the photographs before parting with them. Before the next month had elapsed, my mother died, quite suddenly. When I drove the 300 miles from my home to her home to make arrangements for the funeral and to do a lot of sorting out in the week I took off from work, there was in a prominent position a large and very appreciative card from Amanda. I believe it was virtually the last piece of correspondence my mother received. I was so pleased that she had lived to receive this. Most of all, I was pleased that she lived to make this record. I also found, amongst her belongings, a notebook containing a handwritten draft of the answers to all the questions in this life-book. Unlike me, my mother had very neat handwriting and the draft was meticulously done. I am glad to have it. (Last year, Beth Thornton shared with me a similar record written by a lady she visited regularly until her death last year. This lady lived in the Missionary Village in Bradenton where Stephen’s Uncle Paul lives. Beth thought I might enjoy this lady’s narrative all the more because of her British origins. Beth and I have yet to get together to discuss some of the details of this lady’s book but it is of interest to me that she had in common with my mother an upbringing in a Lancashire mill-town which included having to leave school at the age of 14 to earn a living working in a cotton-mill.)

Now some such mini-autobiographies are perhaps of interest only to a few people. They do not warrant publication. But what of the gospel writers? Why did each of them write his particular gospel? Matthew and Mark do not give us any explicit statement of their aims in writing, though we can deduce from their major emphases what their purpose was. But in Luke’s case, he actually begins his gospel with a clear statement of purpose. I quote:

‘Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.’

Luke is very concerned to get his facts straight, the historical facts with which he tries to present as accurately as possible Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. He mentions that many others have done this. In our Bibles, we have just four accounts, but there do exist other written gospels and there were probably others which have, as yet, never been found. Note, however, that when Luke opens his own account to the Roman Theophilus, he has a purpose. This is expressed in what has been described as the best bit of Greek in the entire New Testament. He puts great care into his work. And his work aims to use historical truth to convey theological truth. He is not writing to Theophilus dispassionately. What he writes about Jesus is not so that Theophilus can take it or leave it. It is in the hope that this careful witness to Theophilus will bring to him ‘the’ truth. That is, that Theophilus will know the way things are in God’s world. What he wants Theophilus to grasp is not just a truth or even a set of truths but the whole truth.

What about our gospel this morning? John’s gospel has a supplement to it. We know that chapter 21, with its different emphases, has been added and that John’s gospel closed initially with chapter 20. So, what we read this morning, in chapter 20: 19-31, is intended by John to be the close of his gospel. I love his closing words:

‘Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’

‘This is truly the gospel. This is the reason the story of Jesus is told (v.30) – in order that we may believe, and be open to the possibility of new life. It is told in order that we may participate in the new creation, and become part of a community of faith that anticipates God’s eternal presence in everyone.’¹ My mother’s brief record of her life-story had appeal only to a very limited group of people. Even the autobiographies of famous people do not have significance for all readers. But the gospel that John writes is of unlimited appeal and significance. What is offered in his gospel is offered to everyone and it is offered with a particular purpose: that of transformation. Moreover, the gospel is directed to each of us, individually and as part of the Christian community. ‘The author, in the final verse, addresses the message directly to the reader. The author chooses not to leave us with an illustration from the life of Jesus nor to entertain us with an attractive narrative. Instead, we are given a direct appeal. The author has brought *us* to an encounter with Jesus in order that we may commit ourselves to a faith that gives life. Now it is up to us to respond.’²

¹ Jose Miguez Bonino and Nestor Oscar Miguez (1991) *That You May Have Life: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John*, New York: General Board of Global Ministries of the UMC, p 92

² Ibid.

When Stephen asked me early this past week for the title of this sermon to print in the bulletin, I said: 'It's rather a boring-sounding title: "God's power, God's plan, and God's presence".' He suggested that I call it GP x 3 – you get it: GP 1: God's power, GP 2 God's plan, and GP3 God's presence. Anyway I hope this helps you remember these three brief but important points which came out of both of our Scripture readings this morning. And remember them not only as a matter of recall but also as a matter of experience. For this is what Peter is talking about is his first sermon in Jerusalem as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, of which we heard a part this morning and this is what John is talking about, as illustrated in this resurrection appearance to Thomas.

First of all, we may experience God's power. For those who saw Jesus feeding the multitudes and healing the sick, it was perhaps easy for them experience what might be called supernatural power. But remember that these were not the acts of a magician. What does Peter say in his sermon? He preaches: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you....' They were signs, pointing not to a wonder-worker so that people could marvel and say: What a clever man! No, they were manifestations of the power of God so that, on seeing them, people could marvel and say: What a great God! Thomas was the last disciple to see the risen Jesus in order to come to faith that he was alive. Thereafter, all disciples, have had to come to faith through the testimony of the first disciples. We have to open ourselves up to believe their testimony that Jesus is risen. And we have to open ourselves up to seeing the power of God in the signs of that resurrection, whether they be dramatic occurrences or the exotic flowers of Selby Gardens that Stephen spoke about last week on Easter Sunday. It has been said that every Sunday is a little Easter and, indeed, it should be. Sunday is the day of Christian worship because the resurrection took place on a Sunday. Whether or not we experience this resurrection faith depends on whether we experience GP1: God's power.

Secondly, Peter says in his sermon to the crowds in Jerusalem that Jesus was crucified and killed by human beings but 'according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God'. We are so used to thinking of the crucifixion as part of God's plan, a crucial part, if you pardon the pun, that we perhaps forget what an extraordinary claim it is to make. What an astonishing reason to live: in order to die. But the gospel writers are all crystal clear about this: Jesus' life was not ripped from him because God was out of control. Jesus' death was part of God's plan. It was the whole reason that God entered human history. Peter links this plan with the power of God. Note that he does not say: Jesus rose, but 'God raised him up'. God is the chief actor in the drama. Again, it is not what a clever Jesus but what a great God! So, Peter proclaims: 'God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.' And the part of Peter's sermon which we heard read this morning ends: 'this Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.'

Here he speaks also of the impact of experiencing the resurrection. It is not for the disciples to cling to as some private experience. It is for them to go out and proclaim as a transforming faith. So it is with Thomas and those John tells us about in our gospel reading this morning. They are commissioned. Once Jesus is no longer appearing in such a way that they can touch and see, all disciples will be dependent first on their testimony and then on the oral and

written testimony of the disciples of every age who witness to this liberating experience to others. This is GP2: God's plan and he involves us in it.

Thirdly, Peter quotes the psalmist with words of confidence: 'I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken.' Peter is speaking not only after Easter but after the Ascension. There can be no further resurrection appearances such as he and the other first disciples knew. In the human Jesus, disciples experienced God's presence in a very particular way. But, after Thomas, all disciples have had to put their faith in a presence which is not visible or tangible. According to our gospel passage this morning, Jesus says that we are especially blessed. He does not so much rebuke Thomas for needing to see in order to believe. After all, Thomas is only asking for what the other ten disciples and what Mary Magdalene had experienced. They got to see and hear and touch Jesus. The only test that Thomas fails 'is to be the first believer who is able to arrive at faith without any other proof except the testimony of the community'³. But what Jesus wants most of all is to encourage all others who cannot have this visible experience of God's presence: 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' This includes us. This is GP3: God's presence.

Let me tell you about the other woman in Stephen's life. She is called Jill. You might think that I would be rather jealous of Jill and for a time I was. Now before you get too worried, let me tell you that Jill is the name given to the female voice of our GPS system. GPS stands for global positioning system. As many of you will know, a GPS enables you to establish exactly where you are, geographically speaking, and to find your route to any destination in the United States (or whichever country you bought the GPS in, for that matter). We bought our system shortly before we moved across state from Daytona Beach to Palmetto. We figured that it would be very useful for us living in a new place. Also we were about to take a trip to North Carolina for a hiking vacation with some friends and knew that there would be a lot of driving on unfamiliar routes. Our GPS has indeed been very helpful. In fact, as those of you have a GPS will know, you can become over-dependent on it. Also, if you don't key in the destination address exactly right you can end up in some funny places. When my brother Michael and his wife, Christine were visiting us last November, they borrowed our GPS and set off for a day out at Fort Desoto Park, St Petersburg. Although I had written out for him the exact address, Michael for some reason did not key this into the GPS. Rather he put it in as Fort Desoto Park. When they came back to us that evening, they had had a good day out, but Michael blamed me for its rather discouraging beginning. Apparently, I had spelt Desoto as two words instead of one and the GPS had taken them much further than I had indicated for the park and beach. They had ended up the far side of Tampa and on a construction site at that.) The voice on a GPS carries much authority, especially when she is called Jill. The instruction manual of our GPS tells us that the voice we started with is called Jill. She speaks with an American accent and I became jealous of Jill because when we first got our GPS Stephen took far more notice of her than he had ever done when I did the navigating. For a while we programmed in a voice with a British accent. According to our manual, she was called Emily. However, Emily made me nervous when I was driving and using our GPS. She always sounded so tentative and her way of pronouncing American names, rather like mine, made her sound as if she didn't know what she was talking about. So

³ Ibid, p 90

we went back to Jill and I've overcome my jealousy. Our global positioning system helps us enormously.

Now imagine that we have a spiritual GPS: God's positioning system, if you will. This is how God helps each of us on our spiritual journey recognize precisely where we are and gives us directions for how to get to where he wants us to be. Jesus promised first disciples that they would receive a GPS, God's positioning system and he promised everyone such a system if only they would be open to God's power, God's plan, and God's presence. Jesus called this GPS the Holy Spirit. Thomas was the last to find his GPS through Jesus appearing to his senses. All of us since then have had to respond to the offer of resurrection faith as proclaimed by methods. We have had to understand the other signs of the resurrection. We are offered the Holy Spirit. This is both the gift and the responsibility of our resurrection faith. It is a faith through which we experience God's power. It is a faith which gives us a part to play in proclaiming God's plan for humankind. It is a faith which calls us together not only to make God present among us but which gathers us so that we will make him present to others. This is why John wrote his gospel; so that we turn on our GPS.

I received this week a little prayer on line from the Taize community in France. It sums up these ideas of God's power, God's plan, and God's presence and it asks us to be open to God's positioning system:

'Christ Jesus, you overcame death and you are mysteriously present to each one of us. You preserve us from discouragement and you fill us with hope. So even with a faith that is very little, we dare to say through our lives: Christ is risen!' In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.