

Trinity 20 Yelverton 9.45 5 October 2008

A few months ago I bought myself a new pair of walking boots. I complained to Corinne that my existing boots had started to fall apart at the top and the waterproof material which was attached to the leather was literally disintegrating.

“These aren’t very well made”, I complained. But then she pointed out to me that I had probably had them over 20 years so maybe they hadn’t done all that badly after all, so the time has come to change them. I knew it; if my boots could think and talk they would be telling me they were past their sell by date and the situation couldn’t be denied – they had to be replaced however much I had loved them all those years. They were no longer fit for purpose – and that was to provide the means by which I can undertake my daily walk.

So off to Kountry Kit I went. I knew I had to get these new boots in good time before I went to see my brother in Uganda – that trip would involve unknown terrain, a different climate, lots of creepy crawlies and the like, in fact rain forest walking – so I wanted to make preparations now. In my view it would simply be a case of gently breaking them in. And so I became the owner of some very good looking Brasher Boots. I did the obligatory three steps around the shop to convince myself that my boot size hadn’t changed. I was still size 9. I don’t know why we have this ritual in shoes shops – as if after 3 steps we will be able to make an informed judgments but it has to be done – and I bet we all do it.

The boots got their first outing the next morning with the daily dog walk to the moor and back. A distance of no more than say a mile or maybe a mile and a half if I make an effort. By the time I got back I was walking like a

cripple. The boots were rubbing and chaffing and I could hardly wait to get them off again.

The next morning I looked forward to my walk with even less enthusiasm than I normally do, although there was no discernable lack of enthusiasm from our 2 spaniels. I was tempted to retrieve my old boots and give them another outing. My mental processes were clear: perhaps the old boots could be repaired. Maybe the rot of the material was only imagined. Perhaps I had been too hasty in buying a new pair – after all 20 years – they should last at least that length of time! But I looked at them and knew they were no longer fit for purpose. Their decline had been gradual but it was the end for them. So I looked at my new boots – implements of self-inflicted torture: why was I putting myself through this.

Courage was needed – so I put them on again and set off for my yomp across the Moor. I then realised that these boots did up in a different way to my last boots. There was no need to do them up right to the top of the boot. I could leave them undone a bit. What joy – I could walk again! I had found a way of continuing my journey without being crippled by the experience. It had been a learning experience and there had been pain.

I won’t pretend it didn’t take a good few weeks to feel at ease with my boots and for them to become even better than my old pair. There were completely broken in by the time I had to undertake the trip to see my brother and they came into their own in the equatorial rainforest of Uganda.

What you may ask have my boots got to do with anything at all and why am I wittering on? Well I would like you to consider this: St Paul writes, “but I press on, hoping to take hold of that which Christ once took hold of for me. My friends, I do not claim to have hold of it yet. What I do say is this: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press

towards the finishing line, to win the heavenly prize to which God has called me in Christ Jesus.”

There are times in our spiritual life as individuals, and our collective journey as a church community, when the old boots have to be thrown away.

This is not something that is easy to face or do. After all, the comfortable friend is being asked to give way to something new. There is pain and chaffing and people get irritated and think that the old really can be reinstated because with a bit of spit and polish they will be as good as new. That I'm afraid is not the situation we are in. We need to journey with the best equipment we can possibly have so that we can be equipped, so that we can journey forward and strain towards the finishing line. And we are equipped not for our own edification but in the service of God and our neighbour.

Now the spiritual journey we are making as a Benefice is one that we have been undertaking for many years and my time as Priest in Charge comes at a time of great change in the church generally. I believe that there is a gradual awakening to the fact that we need to find new ways of being church because the old ways no longer scratch where people itch. Carrying on as we are is not an option.

I have heard people lament the loss of this or that service and the fact that things aren't what they used to be. People feel that they have been shaken out of their comfort zone and it's not pleasant for them. These new services are causing a bit of blistering and pain and irritation. Can I say to those who may be feeling rather fragile with all this change going on that one of the reasons that we are going through this process now in a planned way, is that within a relatively short period of time, when the priests who are currently doing valiant service undertaking services in their retirement will actually not be able to carry on, we will not be able to sustain the current pattern of services.

Now we can either wait for that to happen a deal with a crisis or we can plan to move to a different pattern of worship that is not reliant on priestly ministry. And if you don't think this is happening in Devon then can I share with you that Revd Jill Locock took a service in a parish north of Tavistock a couple of weeks ago when the congregation told her that her visit meant that it was the first time they had received communion in 6 months in their church, such is the shortage of priests in that part of the deanery.

If you look at church attendance, then it is plummeting. If you don't believe me look around you. If you look at people's belief in God however, that remains constant. Somehow we have become disconnected from people. We are journeying through hostile territory – not in the sense of having to fear for our lives – but in the sense that people beyond these walls have made their journey by voting with their feet and do not come here anymore. This is not something peculiar to St Paul's Yelverton, it is part of a trend that has been in motion for some decades now and affects every church in this Benefice. We are all having to come to terms with new ways of journeying together. We are putting on a new pair of boots.

So we can either stick our heads in the sand and carry on as if nothing is happening or we can wake up to the challenges of trying on a new pair of boots. What is important is our walk with God –daily as individual people and together as the family of God in this place. I am sure that we will have to find ways of lacing the boots up to find the best way of doing things but the alternative is to do nothing and that, in my view, will inevitably lead to a slow decline and the prospect of this building and other buildings closing. Princetown church closed – there is no reason to think it will be the last. Other denominations, such as the Methodists, are doing just that – closing buildings. I am not talking about some theoretical happening in the future –

this isn't a debate about whether global warming is or is not really happening. What I speak of is happening now.

But am I depressed about this scenario I paint? The answer is no! We have a great God and we have a great and committed team of people in this Benefice. There is every reason to believe that God can and will work through us by the power of his Holy Spirit – if we let Him. You may have difficulties with the process that has been started over the last few months – this is not easy – this is not without pain – but this is being done so that collectively we can work together to extend God's kingdom. It is not about what we as individuals like or dislike. If that is how you view the situation can I please ask you to think again. We are still in the harvest season – the Harvest is ripe – we need to continue to pray that God will raise up labourers to bring in that harvest.

When bishop John came to speak to the joint meeting of the PCCs he reminded us of the words of Archbishop Temple who said that the church is the only organization in business for the benefit of its non-members. We have a task ahead of us that is about looking out for the needs of others. Someone was heard to say on leaving a church, "I didn't get much out of that service". To which their friend replied, "Yes but what did you put in?"

We all have a contribution to make: young and old; mature Christian or young Christian – because we all should want to move forwards on our journey with Christ as we press ahead forgetting what is behind and seeking God's face for the future. Well if the new boots are still rubbing, you can decide to throw them in the corner and retrieve the worn out pair – they may get you through a while longer – but sooner rather than later you will have to come back to the new boots and when you do you may find that you

are breaking them in at a time of crisis rather than in a planned way and that will be even more painful.

Finally, St Paul made it clear that all his pressing forward was provisional – he hadn't "got there". He was still journeying on. So when I am asked when will things stop changing my answer is the day we die. In the meantime we journey on, hopefully, together with our eyes fixed on the finishing line – which is something I have just crossed because I have said enough.