

Rev. Wendy's sermon on Sunday 17 November 2019

I like to be quite organised. I realise this can be annoying. In the days when I took exams, I was the sort of student who made colour-coded revision timetables, and then followed them. I even tried to do this for my children, but I regret to say they didn't really appreciate my efforts.

Currently, I inflict on Alan my monthly table of church commitments, again colour-coded. Like my children, I suspect Alan does not appreciate this as much as he ought to. Indeed, when I question him, it is quite obvious he hasn't made any attempt to memorise my movements. Still, it makes me happy.

Having heard this, it will not surprise you to discover that I am also a great writer of lists. I always have a 'to do' list, which is stored on my iPad and synced across my devices. Bliss.

And I also spend time writing other less practical lists, such as the top ten cities I'd like to visit, or ten things I'd like to do when I grow up.

I also write churchy or theological lists too. I have spent many hours thinking of my top ten hymns, or miracles or Bible characters. Great for passing sleepless nights or for long journeys.

Now, I am well aware this might seem a bit odd, but I can blame this habit of writing 'top tens' on two upstanding Christians: the former Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend John Pritchard, and my friend, the Rector of the Beane Valley benefice, the Rev Jenny Gray.

You see, about five years ago, John Pritchard published a book called Ten. Subtitled, Why Christianity Makes Sense, the idea of the book is that he lists ten things he believes on any given God-related topic - so ten things he believes about prayer, or the Holy Spirit, or ten reasons why he thinks people have a problem with faith. Jenny recommended this book and I bought it and read it cover to cover. Unfortunately, I've lent my copy to some unknown person. If you find it, I'd love it back. It has my name inside.

Anyway, Jenny was so taken with this idea that she started a column in her parish magazine entitled Jen's Ten. Five years later it is still going strong, I believe - although she must have exhausted all John Pritchard's ideas for lists long ago.

When I first read the book Ten, I was busy preparing to go to selection conference for training for ordained ministry and so I decided it would be a really good idea to write ten things I believe about God, on the off-chance someone might actually ask me about that.

In today's Gospel reading [Luke 21. 5-19], the disciples are warned that they will be asked what they believe, in even more stressful circumstances than a selection conference. Their very lives may depend on what they say. They will be handed over to synagogues and prisons and brought before kings and governors.

Jesus tells them that when the time comes, they will be given the words they need to say. So, it seems he wasn't expecting them to bring a list of the ten things they believed about Him.

I wonder what you do when someone asks you about your faith? Are you confident in talking about what you believe or do you get tongue-tied and wish afterwards you'd said what you really think? I do suspect most of us fall into that second group. I know I do, even after all my training.

As we all tend to panic when challenged even mildly, I do think that we need to do a certain amount of preparation. We don't need pre-prepared answers, of course. As Jesus warns, that is not going to convince anyone that our faith is a vital, living, growing entity. But we do need to have some idea of what we believe so that when we are put on the spot, we can allow God to help us with what to say.

In a moment, we are going to practise. I want you to think of one or two things you believe - about God, Jesus, the church, the Bible, whatever comes to you. We will take it as read that there is one God, that he is known through the Trinity and that St M/St A is the best possible place to worship him. Apart from that, what you write is completely up to you.

You don't need to write your name, but I am going to ask you to put your piece of paper into a basket at the offertory if you so wish. So that we can offer all these thoughts up to God as gifts, from him to us and back again.

[At this point the congregation were all given time to write something(s) they believed on the paper provided].

What did I write? Well, the first reading today was a very joyful psalm [Psalm 98]. One of the things I feel we are called to do is to communicate that God is a joyful God. He is not just joyful, of course. He is multi-faceted. But I do think that we fail to tell people that God can be fun, that he seems to have a sense of humour, that he laughs with us, not at us. Keeping that secret puts people off God, because they think he must be dull and stern.

So, I have written that I believe that God is joyful and that he wants us to be joyful, too.

Thank you for trying that. It gets easier the more you do it. Why not go home and become weird like Wendy and write a full list of ten things you believe? It might show up some things you don't believe, or some areas of uncertainty, and that's good. There are no right answers here, although there may very well be some wrong ones. You may like to share your list or you may prefer to keep it to yourself.

For those of you who haven't tried this before, welcome to the discipline of apologetics. The art of thinking through what you believe because someday soon someone may come to you seeking answers, or may challenge you. And it's best to be prepared. What you say might change their life.

A true story to end - just over 20 years ago I had recently become a Christian. I was working as temp in an office and a young man sat there, mocking Christians and their beliefs. What did I say? Nothing at all.

I was ashamed of that then and I am ashamed of it now, although forgiven. When someone mocked my Lord, I did not speak up, because I just didn't know what to say. I didn't really know what I believed. If only someone had suggested to me I write a list.