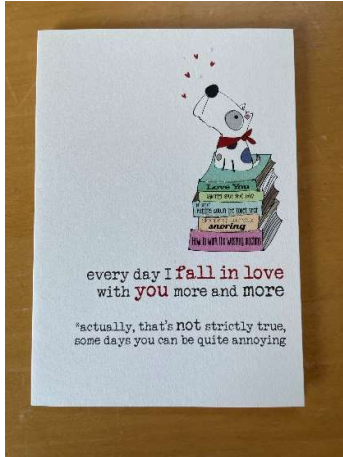
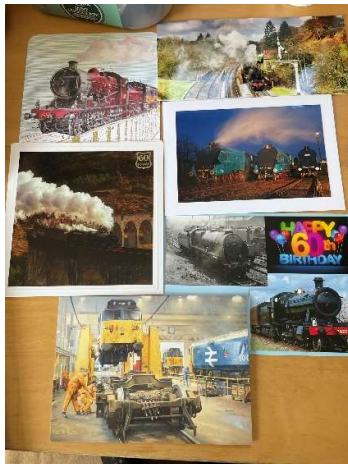


Sermon – Sunday 14 August 2022 - Hebrews 11:29 -12:2, Luke 12:49 -56

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.



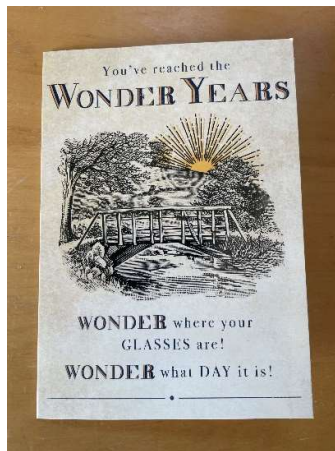
Thank you for birthday gifts and birthday cards. My wife managed the most romantic card



There were a good number of train cards.



Several comments on the joys of being 60



And two comment on my memory. Thank you Ray and Ann for this (above)



And Michèle and John for this (above – Edmund Hilary on top of Everest).



We all know the delights of memory, and what it's like when we can't remember. I can tell you the stations between Cambridge – Waterbeach, Ely, Shippea Hill, Lakenheath, Brandon, Thetford, Harling Road, Eccles Road, Attleborough, Spooner Row, Wymondham and Norwich – presumably as a result of a misspent youth, spending too much time on trains – but get me to reception at our favourite hotel in Newcastle, and they'll ask me for the registration of the car, and I haven't got a clue. And being serious, one of the great sadnesses for all of us is when we can't remember, or we have a friend or a partner who can't remember. I'll never forget being phoned quite late one night by a member of the congregation in Bury who asked me to come and help him convince his wife that he was her husband. We know how much that hurts.



Society too, needs to remember, needs to hold its history. The Israelites, the Jews of biblical times, were always concerned with memory, the recording of what had gone before in the history of their people. They cared deeply about it - there were traditions and stories that meant a great deal to them - and it was written down carefully and much studied. It was a record of false starts, challenges they had faced and so much more - but most importantly, it was a record of God's involvement in their history. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was fully aware of this, whoever they were, and used it in their argument.

They give the Greatest Hits of history - mentioning names Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and all the prophets. The main events - the Escape from Egypt, shutting the mouths of lions and so on are all mentioned. All the terrible fates of the faithful are carefully listed, all those who suffered for their faith. He is writing for Jewish people in the middle of the Roman Empire – men and women whose country was under occupation, whose faith and way of life were changing – memory and past examples are important.



The writer is doing more than just looking back, vital though that is, he looks puts the past in context. None of these people, despite all they went through, none of them received what had been promised. The glory of God in Jesus was yet to come, to be fully realised. They were of glorious, lasting memory, but not made perfect until Jesus came, suffered on the cross, and took his place with God.

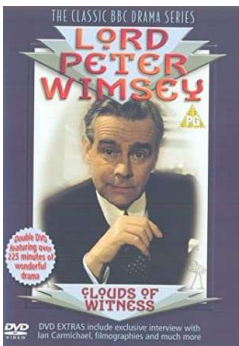
The writer to the Hebrews was arguing that they, and by extension we, are surrounded by such a Cloud of Witnesses that we can truly believe, truly accept what they were waiting for, what they believed in at any cost.



There is a lovely painting in Truro Cathedral, of the clouds of saints coming from the West, coming into Cornwall, where beams of light illustrate churches named for them, and particularly Truro Cathedral. All those men and women, forming a huge cloud of witness to faith, to what God has done.



I do feel surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in our churches. I felt it more in Suffolk, perhaps because I was there for 15 years, and we lived surrounded by the past. Edmund seemed a real presence, to say nothing of the monks of the monastery. We had one chap who dressed up as a monk and did tours of the abbey ruins, and he knew his stuff. I won't forget him and a 7 year old Harry having a very deep conversation about life in the monastery, and were there choir boys, and how did they worship, and how he sang in the choir, and what it meant to him. It really did come alive.



Julie reminded me that there is a novel by Dorothy L Sayers - herself a formidable theologian - called "Cloud of Witnesses". It is one of the Lord Peter Wimsey books, and it is about a country house murder, the accusation that his brother The Duke of Denver is the murderer, a sensational trial in the House of Lords and the importance of witnesses. In the TV adaptation with Ian Carmichael, dating – would you believe – from 1972, there is a scene where Lord Peter is flying back from America in a small plane, carrying the vital piece of evidence, literally flying through the clouds to bring light and freedom for his brother.

At the end of the book, both Inspector Parker and Lord Peter get totally drunk, they behave pretty disgracefully - in a good way. The policeman who pours them into a carriage looks about him and says “Thank Gawd there weren’t no witnesses”. It is important to be a witness, says the writer to the Hebrews, and there are so many to tell the truth about Jesus.



We must never forget that that our “cloud of witnesses” are not witnessing to themselves, they are witnessing to Christ. All that they say and do, the faith that they held and professed, they point to Jesus. And that can be where we go wrong. Christian faith is more than a warm, comfortable heritage – going back to some mythical time when churches were full, and everyone was happily worshipping together, when a very English God was in his heaven and the sun never set on the Empire.

There is very little comfort in the gospel reading from Luke today. It talks about the challenge that he brings - fire, a tough baptism, and the stress he is under until everything is completed. He has a clear idea of the trials he is to undergo, and how difficult they will be. Here he acknowledges that to be a Christian may also be difficult, costly, of even the most close of relationships. As you can imagine, there has been a lot of discussion about what Jesus is actually saying here. Does being a Christian, accepting the love of God in our lives, mean that there will be so many challenges? This is not Jesus bringing a new age of peace and light, but of difficulty and challenge. How much of this is relevant to us? Is it really going to be so difficult to be a Christian?



It is a difficult reading, and, if I’m honest, I am not sure what to make of it. Being a Christian has brought me strength in times of difficulty, comfort when the world is too much, light in the darkness. Being ordained has been a pleasure – I have lived in nice houses, in very nice places, and the vast majority of

people it has been privilege to serve have been (and are) lovely. Not a bad old life, a pretty good 60 years.

And the future – not easy. A few more years of paid employment, then a nice retirement somewhere in beautiful Northumberland, and well, who knows?



Jesus reminds us that we cannot tell what is going on at the moment, let alone what the future holds. People in his time were skilled - they had to be - at saying what the weather would be. I may have a Geography degree from the University of Cambridge, and I am scared stiff at how climate is changing and where this weather is going. A friend who farms in Suffolk says that they have had only 6% of the average rainfall he would expect, and accordingly he got his harvest in several weeks early, he's finished now. Our churches do Harvest Festivals in October – because we've always done Harvest Festivals in October – but the world is changing. It is frightening.



There are few comforting words in today's readings – and perhaps this Birthday Card is most appropriate for how part of me is feeling today.

Except for the fact that we are of the blessed generation who know about Jesus and God's plan, who we can live in that knowledge, who can involve ourselves, believe in our faith, and share that faith others. Amen.

Peter Barham, 14 August 2022