

Opening your minds

Acts 3:12-19; Luke 24:36b-48

When one of your Kirk Session elders recommends a book to you with the portentous words, "You might get a sermon out of it", you know you need to get to a book shop and get it ordered.

The book in question is, 'Ten Survival Skills For A World in Flux' by Tom Fletcher. Fletcher is the Principal of Hertford College, Oxford, and the University's youngest head of house. He is a former UK Ambassador to Lebanon, foreign policy adviser to three Prime Ministers, and much more.

I'm not quite sure whether he is an innovative thinker, or a synthesiser and adapter of the ideas of others, or a radical simplifier, but I've found it not only a cracking good read with a number of significant echoes for the state of the country, world and Church today.

"...then (Jesus) opened their minds..."

Nelson Mandela said that, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." In the world of faith, or schools and universities, or business and commerce, or politics, or science or the Arts, what do we need to learn if we are to find better ways to live together, better ways to respond to the threats and opportunities we face. In his book Tom Fletcher warns that if the generations alive today are not equipped with the skills they need, then extremism, inequality, drift, intolerance and distrust will increase...The Covid lockdowns of 2020-21 drove us further apart physically, forcing us to think about what human connection we value, and what we can survive without. We will need survival skills that will blend learning for the head, hand, and heart. We need a better understanding of human ingenuity from the past that took us from cave paintings to driverless cars. "The Stone Age didn't end because we ran out of stones, but because we found a better way to make what we needed. Our curiosity ...is an essential survival skill."ⁱ

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The Greek philosopher Socrates said, "Education is not the filling of a vessel but the kindling of a flame." How are we to open our minds? In a world where we spend so much time looking at computer screens and mobile phone screens (and that's not always bad) despite this technological connectivity we live in one of the most isolated eras where loneliness was a pandemic before the Covid pandemic. Young and old alike are looking for camaraderie and friendship and face-to-face encounter. A choir, a dance group, a games afternoon, a coffee morning, a club for people with disability, uniformed organisations, a Beetle Drive, the thundering of tiny little horses' hooves in the St Matthew's Hall next week. Sound familiar? It is all in our intimations, and more, because it is what this Church provides.

When our minds and hands and hearts are open, we find a place in a fast-moving and anonymous world, and we are enabled to do something to make the world better. Through the haze and the technology and the noise we must understand a simple lesson from history: those who adapt fastest will win. And those who adapt slowest will lose. This is about survival. For ourselves, and for the young people who will follow afterwards. Not throwing everything old and traditional out but working hard to ensure that it is fit for purpose, that it still says something, reveals something, enables something, points to something in our world today. It may be something of beauty, it may be something of practical use. But it still enables and engages and enhances. It maybe speaks from the past, but it must still speak into the present, and speak on to the future.

"...then (Jesus) opened their minds..."

The disciples, and the other followers of Jesus, crippled by fear and doubt, had hidden themselves away behind locked doors, afraid that the authorities, Jewish or Roman, would be coming after them next. Locked away physically, emotionally, spiritually. Fear is the disciples' natural human

response, and Jesus, in a way we can't quite understand, steps into that fear, meets them where they are, engages with them, and opens their minds. Into their chaos and confusion, their fear and frustration, guilt and grief, doubt and anxiety and suspicion, distrust and restlessness, despondency and fear Jesus steps in. Look at Me, handle Me, eat with Me, listen to Me. Remember all those things you learned in the Synagogue and Temple, all the things I told you about our age-old faith and how it applies today through the new understanding I have given it, all those laws of Moses, and prophets and psalms. Well, listen again! Be curious, begin to understand as I open your minds. Says Jesus. And they listened.

Peter did when he addressed the people in the Temple in our reading from Acts. "The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His servant Jesus...the Holy and Righteous One...the Author of life, Whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses..."

The open mind is the portal through which faith and education and knowledge and beauty and literature and a gracious politics and a generous economy will enter. An open mind will help us not only learn but to believe.

Having an open mind doesn't mean we are to be gullible. That old sceptical scientist Richard Dawkins had a point when he said, "By all means let's be open-minded, but not so open-minded that our brains drop out." There are those who say they are open-minded when they are not. Globally we seem to be in a period when there is too much certainty and too little curiosity. People find themselves drawn into echo chambers in which they hear only the views of those with whom they already agree. As anyone with a smartphone or a tablet knows they can unlock extraordinary and exciting potential. But they can also make us idler and more apathetic or distracted. It is all too easy not to care, to see it all as too difficult, to swallow the easy conspiracy, or simply to

oppose. The internet has given a voice to the angry and intolerant. It has become harder to find those ready to fight for something, as opposed to against something. It is often easier to destroy than it is to build, as the prophet Jeremiah said in the 6th BC. Or to quote the American scientist Charles Kettering, "People are very open-minded about new things - as long as they're exactly like the old ones."

When Jesus opened the minds of His followers, He told them about the old things that still rang true but interpreted them in a new way for that generation, to show how why they were still relevant. There's nothing like a presumed-dead Saviour popping up in your dining room to make you think again about what is right and wrong, what is possible and impossible, what is relevant and irrelevant.

When Tom Fletcher was Ambassador to Lebanon, he visited a refugee camp in the Bekaa Valley. He met a 12-year-old girl, Zeinab, outside the small tent she shared with her extended family. She had been out of formal education for four years. Her school, home, hospital and innocence had been destroyed. Her father killed, her mother working long hours. This 12-year-old was left trying to teach her younger siblings how to read and write. Her 8-year-old brother showed a picture he'd been drawing: stick children and war planes. The planes were shooting stick missiles at the stick children. But Zeinab had hope. Her mind remained open. She'd heard about the possibility of a make-shift school opening. "I want to be an astronaut," she said. The ambassador asked, "...do you want to go to the moon?" "No," she replied. "I want to find safer planets for my little brother..." She grabbed the ambassador's sleeve. Her face was earnest. "But what do I really need to learn?" Zeinab's mind was open. Did she ever find a world in which the rockets her brother drew were aimed at the stars and not at the children? "I will do what I have to do. Will you?" she asked the ambassador.ⁱⁱ

"...then (Jesus) opened their minds..."

He did it for His followers to help them learn how to share their developing Christian faith in their hostile or indifferent but still growing world into which the apostles soon journeyed.

How might Jesus open your minds today? To take back control; to be curious; to find purpose; to find your voice; to find, grow and mobilise your community; to co-exist; to be kind; to live with technology; to be global, to be a good ancestor to generations still to come?

"...then (Jesus) opened their minds..."

Pray that He will do the same for us. Then we will survive.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Tom Fletcher, Ten Survival Skills For A World In Flux, p49

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pps 6-7