

28<sup>th</sup> May 2021

## Sermons

**“I feel a feeling which I feel you all feel.”**

*George Riding, From a sermon in the London Mission, 1885*

If I'd heard George Riding, Bishop of Southwell, preach, I'd have got stuck at the sentence above. I know what he *means*. But I'd have to think about it so much I'd have missed the rest of his sermon. It's like the quote from Donald Rumsfeld, the US Secretary for Defence in the early 2000s, in a Department of Defence Briefing in 2002:

*There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know ... it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones. The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, or vice versa.*

I know what he *means*, but it took me a long time to work it out ... It's exactly the same with, “I feel a feeling which I feel you all feel”.

Every preacher needs empathy. But does he or she always feel what the people in the pews are feeling? They do sometimes, as I discovered ...

The 1980s saw the spread of HIV and AIDS in Edinburgh, in the world of illegal drugs through shared needles, and in the gay community through unprotected sex. This led, in some places, to the stigmatising of gay people in general, with comments such as, “It's God's punishment for being gay,” being voiced. I sought to challenge this one Sunday in a sermon, knowing that I would get flack for my “liberal” attitudes. I was right. Several of my congregation weren't happy. The following Sunday, a lady came early to church and insisted I spend some time with her. *Another brickbat*, I thought. But I was wrong. The lady thanked be for tackling a difficult subject. “That sermon was for me,” she said. “My son has AIDS. No one here knows that. He got HIV through an infected blood-product for his haemophilia. But we've both been stigmatised as a result. Your sermon last week was what I needed. I felt you understood.”

I'm not sure I did understand what this mother and son were living with. But shared feelings obviously mattered. Someone in the pew had feelings which found a resonance with mine, and a sermon on a difficult subject had served its purpose.

### **A prayer for today**

*Lord, please take me out of the pulpit and put me in the pew when I preach ... Amen.*

*An original reflection by @ Tom Gordon*

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