

Annual Report of the Vicar – St Bartholomew’s, Otford, 2022-23

Readings: Acts 2.14a, 36-41; Luke 24.13-35



Lord Jesus, stand among us now in your risen power and help us to meet you afresh on the way and in the Scriptures, to the glory of your name. Amen.

I used to be the producer and presenter of religious programmes for Manx Radio when on the Isle of Man, and one of the things I did occasionally was a sort of religious version of "Desert Island Discs". The castaways would have to choose pieces of religious music that had affected or inspired them, and in addition to an inspirational book or prayer, they would be allowed to take one passage of Scripture that meant something very special to them.

I'm fairly certain that many people would share my own choice of Scripture without the slightest hesitation - and that's today's Gospel reading. That wonderful story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus seems to me to be at the very heart of what the Resurrection is all about, and it is a passage that comes back again and again to refresh me and challenge me anew as I continue on my own Christian journey.

And as it's a Scripture which is all about movement, change, and moving on it strikes me as being an ideal story to preach about in these times of change for our parish and on the day of an Annual Meeting when we look back to review the past year, consider the present and then look ahead to what the future holds.

Today was originally planned as my last Sunday with you. I thought it might be a perfect time to reflect, recharge batteries and say a big thank you to colleagues and congregation as well as bidding my farewells and nudging you forward into the vacancy and the future with encouragement.

I will be offering words of appreciation to various people in the annual meeting after our morning services, but recognising that not everyone can make it please accept these thanks now for all you do in whatever context, because everybody's contribution to church life is invaluable.

However, it was thought it would be good if I stayed for the confirmation service in May so you will get a proper final sermon at Pentecost as you are encouraged to join those disciples who were sent out empowered by the Spirit.

So on the day of our annual meeting I get the chance to reflect on this glorious passage from Luke's gospel about the encounter on the road to Emmaus, which we also thought about together during our Lent course only a few weeks ago.

As you think about the story you might like to consider yourselves whether, at this point in your life together as a church, you are like those travelling companions at the start of their seven-mile journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus, downcast, mournful, gloomy... Or are you like those same friends after they met with the risen Lord, and realised just who it was they were walking and talking with, their attitudes changed, their mood brightened?

I've come to realize how much the New Testament is filled with roads and meetings, and we all find ourselves treading those routes at some time or another during our Christian lives.

First off, there's the road to Bethlehem. This is the long road people travel along when they want to meet the Jesus of Christmas at the other end. It's a road for the one or two days a year churchgoer, the person who likes the Christmas story and all the fun of the season, but wants to end their journey at the manger, with the baby Jesus inside and all the cuddly animals gazing on adoringly. They don't want to go any further, or to be challenged by the message Jesus came to preach. It's a road that keeps returning folk to the same place, which is a great starting point, but few move on. There's a real danger that we merely tolerate these people rather than welcoming them to what they have actually attended. We could be a whole lot better at meeting people where they are, people on the margins, welcoming rather than gossiping about them. We know there is more to the gospel than being satisfied by an occasional church visit, or even stopping to look at our porch crib scene in the weeks leading up to Christmas, but at least they are stepping out on the path and we need to walk with them and take the chance to explain our faith and about Jesus, just as that so-called stranger did on the road to Emmaus.

Another road we can find ourselves walking is the road to Calvary. This is the road we are called to walk when we follow Christ, taking up our crosses daily to share in his sufferings. It's not an easy road, and some shy away from it, but it's a road we must take if we want to be Christ's disciples. That means not being ashamed to be members of this church or to admit our Christian faith. St Paul writes of this often in his letters: "Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God," he writes to Timothy, for example.

In a small way that begins to be achieved when we stand together at such things as pop-up stalls and other activities in the village and we have had great success, socially and financially, with these in the past year.

Yet another road we can find ourselves on is the road to Damascus. This is the road on which we share Saul's experience of meeting the risen Christ in a dramatic way; it's a route that changes our lives forever. But of course we don't keep on meeting with Christ in dramatic ways, we don't have blinding light and thunderous voice experiences with the Lord every five minutes. This is certainly a road where we meet with Christ, but we have to move on.

But it is on the road to Emmaus where we meet Christ in the ordinary and everyday and often in the unexpected. It's where we have the opportunity to learn from the great teacher, and where we always have flashes of revelation and truth. It's the place where our questions begin to be answered, where we meet Christ, and our hearts burn within us.

I always feel that the road to Emmaus symbolises our daily journey as Christians. We all have downcast moments; we all have moods in which we feel lonely, forgotten, and frustrated. We're walking away from Jerusalem, the Holy City - away from the glorious and back to the ordinary. We may have been to a wonderful and exhilarating service, only to come away feeling that everything else is a letdown, and we'll never enjoy such a mountaintop experience again. We may come away from a Bible study, having understood most of what was said during its course, but finding that we forget all the important bits as time goes on.

We may simply go through bad times of illness, depression, anxiety, or worldly problems and feel that for one reason or another we're distant from Christ, or maybe that he isn't really interested after all. And once we begin to think that Christ isn't that close to us after all, then maybe we don't feel like going to church quite so regularly, or saying our prayers, or reading the Word.

Or perhaps it's just a time of change, like the one facing this parish but also churches in the deanery, the diocese and in the Church of England, which leads to sadness or concern. You will shortly be passing through a period of uncertainty in the coming vacancy. Some won't be able to wait for the new priest; some will feel things can't quite be the same. In any event, most of us don't like things to be too different - even when we're not particularly comfortable with the way things are, there can be something strangely reassuring about the familiar.

It's at just these times that we must remember the road to Emmaus story in Luke's Gospel. Because you see when we do feel downhearted or lonely or a long way from God it's a time to be reminded that our feelings just don't fit the facts. The truth is that we're not alone and there's no reason to be afraid. Jesus lives and our risen Lord walks our road with us, just as he did with the two friends on the road to Emmaus. When we focus our attention on him we soon realise how close he actually is, and our downcast mood can only be replaced by joy.

The sad fact is that many people miss out on meeting with the risen Lord in their daily lives because they don't allow him to open their eyes. Like the travellers walking to Emmaus, folk fail to recognise Jesus even when he is walking right beside them. Bible commentator William Barclay suggests that Cleopas and his companion were blinded by the setting sun - in fact they were blinded by the risen Son of God, deliberately prevented from recognising him until they were able to understand the truth about him.

And that truth is that the Lord is in control of every encounter, God is in the midst of his world and involved in everything that happens in it. Jesus actually becomes rather exasperated by disciples who cannot grasp the obvious - he tells this pair off for their unbelief and lack of Bible study. Jesus doesn't pull any magic answers and explanations out of a hat - that's the whole point behind this story.

Jesus opens the minds of these companions to understand new things in what they already know, in Scriptures they have already read, in experiences they have already had – something important to consider at an annual meeting and especially when a parish is soon to be in a vacancy.

And just as those two disciples learned about the God With Us when Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, especially the passages about himself, so they learned about God With Us in the breaking of the bread - a familiar action given life-changing new meaning for them. It's appropriate at any communion service to remember that towards the ending of the story it's at the meal table, a setting of such simplicity and ordinariness, that the moment of revelation comes. Jesus has walked with these disciples unrecognised; he has prepared them by talking of the Scriptures and has moved their hearts. Then he makes himself known silently and suddenly. When the bread is broken it isn't just a case of the disciples realising who their travelling companion is. It is a moment of instant recognition of an eternal truth and of the sufferings and resurrection of Christ.

More importantly, as I been stressing all along, all this happens in an ordinary moment. So often in the times when we feel we are experiencing the presence of Christ the least he is right there, and maybe it's only later that we too slap our foreheads and say, "Of course! He was there after all."

Woody Allen once said: "Our civilization stands at the crossroads. Down one road is despondency and despair. Down the other road is total annihilation. I hope we'll take the right road." Woody Allen was obviously trying to be funny, but his statement reflects the despair and pessimism of our times. Thankfully, a more positive version comes in the writings of the prophet Jeremiah: "This is what the LORD says: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6.16)

Perhaps some of you who have been in this congregation for many years can think about all those clergy who have led you in the past, perhaps you don't like the thought of new things coming, different to things you have grown used to.

And so at this point in your life as a church I'd like to point you away from the empty tomb, away from the Christmas crib, away from the mountaintop, away from the valleys, away from the Damascus road. Instead I would point you to the Emmaus road, that oh so ordinary place where the risen Christ can be encountered afresh, where we can begin to understand and dare to begin to believe.

But just remember. The reward of the search is to go on searching. Discovering God means to seek him unceasingly. There's no beginning or ending in the Christian faith. We all move on to fresh encounters, challenges, and discoveries day by day and week by week, if we will but dare to recognize and embrace them.

The artist Caravaggio painted two versions of the supper at Emmaus. The first shows the disciples startled and drawing back from Jesus almost fearfully when they realise who he is; the second shows the disciples leaning in to Jesus, eager to be close to him, wanting to find out more... Are you I wonder like the disciples in the first picture or the second?

The road goes ever on and on. But we have nothing to fear if we will but recognize our fellow traveller and invite him in. This story about the walk to Emmaus is a story for everyday life today and for St Bart's today. If any are walking the Emmaus road right now or when we walk it in the future with disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, discouragement, despondency, depression, and despair – let's remember we are not walking alone. The unseen "stranger", the risen Jesus is walking with us.

I'm going to end with an oft-used quote that is said to have been dedicated to French poet Guillaume Apollinaire if not actually written by him. I think it sums up our Emmaus road encounters and I hope speaks to you here in Otford as you continue your journey with Christ.

"Come to the edge," he said.
"We can't, we're afraid!" they responded.
"Come to the edge," he said.
"We can't, We will fall!" they responded.
"Come to the edge," he said.
And so they came...
And he pushed them...
And they flew."

Rev'd David

Sunday, April 23rd, 2023 (report delivered as sermon in morning services)