

Jesus in conversation with those on the edge

Inevitably, when there is a sermon to prepare, it is often occurrences in the last few days which resonate most strongly with the set Bible readings. On Thursday the licensed clergy of the Diocese gathered for one of Bishop Graham's teaching mornings – please bear with me, Methodist brothers and sisters. Our speaker, Canon Dr. Alan Bartlett was speaking about *sustaining ministry in the long term*, but started with some none-too cheerful references to where we are at the moment. He quoted another Anglican priest and theologian who last year wrote that the Church of England is now *a sad church in a sad society*. Now let me say that the clergy gathered in the Cathedral that morning were far from sad: there's a lot of joy and energy when we come together. But I think most of us knew what he meant. We're sad because many of our congregations are struggling; a whole generation appears to have little appetite for Christian faith; and, in the words of another quote which resonated with me, because the principles we've inherited about how to do parochial ministry, or how to be a local church, are no longer true enough: that even if we try that bit harder, *no amount of expended time or imagination can make the church thrive on the old model utterly unchanged*.

That the dear old Church of England might now be characterised as a sad church is a powerful phrase; so it came back to me as I read of Cleopas and his companion sadly walking the road to Emmaus. And I wondered if, deep down, part of our sadness is for the same reason: do we feel that Jesus has left us? Or at least, has left our church?

The two disciples will eventually discover that Jesus has not left them; indeed, had come to walk alongside them; but the trouble is they don't recognise him; and, more profoundly, don't recognise that Christ could be truly present in the rejection and apparent failure of Good Friday. And so Jesus sets out to convince them otherwise: that it wasn't incomprehensible that the Messiah should suffer these things: indeed, the signs are there in the scriptures.

And so the question arises whether our problem is not that Jesus has left us, but that we are failing to recognise him; because we don't expect to find him in a church which is itself experiencing chronic rejection and feeling a sense of failure?

In a way, Alan Bartlett encouraged us to think along similar lines, as he asked us where did we see signs of the kingdom of God, in our churches, ministry or parishes? Because our churches, of whatever denomination, are not the most important thing: they are provisional; even if they fail, the kingdom cannot fail, for the kingdom belongs to God.

One place we might look for signs of the kingdom is at the edge of the Church. One of our Worship Assistants was reflecting on the people she repeatedly meets in the church building during the week, who clearly find it meaningful and welcoming; on young people who keep coming to the Christmas Eve Crib Service even when they are no longer children, or adults who keep coming even when they no longer have children to bring; on those who faithfully turn up to ring the bells, even though they don't attend the service; on a mystery worshipper who left part way through the service, but left a pound for us in the pew. I think of the people who are keen to see St. Edmund's made more accessible – even though I doubt many of them would start coming on a Sunday if we did. I think of a mother whose full name we don't yet know, who has asked if she can put a bench in one of my churchyards so she can sit there to remember her son who has died. [At the Methodist Church, I know, there will be those you see regularly at your drop-ins, or who come only at significant times of the year, or when a family member dies.]

People still come, seeking and perhaps finding something: instinctively believing that a church, whether building or community, represents a place of welcome, a source of peace and maybe hope, somewhere to bring their grief or their questions.

Last week we heard John telling of Jesus' appearance to his disciples on that first Easter Day and a week later, standing in the midst of what we would recognise as a gathering of the faithful on the first day of the week. But Luke takes us from the empty tomb off to the edge, to join two disciples who are walking away from the city. When we walked in Acle with Jesus on Good Friday, we were encouraged to walk in silence: on that day, that was the best witness to Jesus' presence among us. But on the Emmaus walk, Jesus is present in the conversation. It would be good to have Jesus join us in our conversations with those on the edge of the church: it might help us to find the right words to say! We probably wouldn't choose to deliver a digest of all the scriptures concerning the Messiah, *beginning with Moses and all the prophets*; but then Jesus was talking with fellow Jews, who were already his disciples. But I note that before Jesus speaks, he listens to Cleopas and his companion: asking questions to discover what's on their minds and how they are feeling. We need to listen to those on the edge: what is life like for them? Why might they be here? And after Jesus has spoken, he leaves the next step up to them: when they reach the village to which they were going, he makes as if to go on. But they invite him to stay: he's clearly said just enough to pique their interest, engage their curiosity: I hope that we could do the same.

But we have to accept that the response is theirs to make. We'd love them to join us as gather around the table where Jesus makes himself known in the breaking of bread; but that may not be what they're looking for. Drawing on former Archbishop Robert Runcie, Alan Bartlett said the Church should be like a jam roly-poly: a rich, warm heart with soft, not hard edges. Soft so that people aren't put off coming to the edge of the Church: for that might be where they meet Jesus.