

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

## **A healthy Church – outward-looking?**

April 6<sup>th</sup> 2008. Luke 24.13-35

I don't know how many of you saw the BBC's Passion over Holy Week – with the final, resurrection episode, on the evening of Easter Day. The director chose a particular device to portray some of the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection – that is to say, he had completely different actors from Joseph Mawle, who had acted Jesus up to that point, coming and speaking to the disciples, puzzling them – and then leading them, very tentatively, to believe that it was the Lord, who had risen... The actor who played the stranger on the Emmaus road looked particularly different from Joseph Mawle. It was only when he took bread and broke it, repeating the words that Jesus had said at the Last Supper, that one saw dawning recognition and hope on the two disciples' faces. The television viewer was left with the open question – was it Jesus these people saw – or did they see Jesus *in* someone else?

Each of us probably knows what we believe about that question (though we may not necessarily all believe exactly the same thing) – but the way it was left open points us to a truth that all Christians can surely accept as part of their life-experience: we find Jesus in unexpected people, at unlikely times, and in places where we hadn't looked for him. This may be the Jesus we can serve, in the stranger, the child, the poor or suffering; or it may be the Jesus who speaks to us, challenges us, in what people say, or how they live.

This basic Christian experience, of which the Emmaus story can stand as a symbol, links-in, of course, with the theme of being outward-looking – an outward-looking church community of Christians, the second mark of a healthy church. To be a healthy and faithful group of disciples we need to lift our eyes beyond our own or our church's preoccupations – otherwise we may miss chances of meeting Jesus in unexpected people, at unlikely times, and in places far from the realm of church life as we share it here on a Sunday morning.

Let's look at the point in a different way, also linking it with this morning's Gospel. In each pew I've put a copy of a picture entitled 'Emmaus' by a Filipino artist, Emmanuel Garibay .

<http://www.asianchristianart.org/galleries/resurrection/pages/Garibay.html>

It's a surprising picture in many ways, and you may not like it at all. And even more surprising is the commentary Garibay has provided, pointing out that 'the figure at the centre is a woman, and everyone is laughing around her. But the point is that the joke is that people are laughing because they thought all along that Jesus was a man, and that Jesus is a Caucasian looking guy, you know...all these conventional concepts about Jesus.'

Well – you may think that Garibay has taken things too far, in portraying Jesus as a woman, and the meal at Emmaus as a drink in a pub. And you may well feel that he's entirely missed the point of what the 'penny-dropping' moment over that meal really was about – not about Jesus being one gender or another, but about Jesus being *risen*. But put that sort of inner dialogue on one side for the moment...Because Garibay goes on to tell us

something very interesting in the last two sentences printed on the page –it's about why the men are laughing at this extraordinary moment: 'The idea of laughing is very common among Filipinos – to laugh at their mistakes. It's all part of understanding the culture and it's also part of contextualizing the concept of faith within the culture.'...

So – whether or not this is a good or edifying depiction of the Emmaus experience, this picture does tell us something about how different people are in their reactions. European or American people might think that the moment of realisation at Emmaus would have been greeted with looks of awe, amazement or shock, as in some of the classical works of art dealing with the same event – but Garibay is telling us that a profound revelation might make a Filipino laugh – because that's part of his or her culture.

It strikes me – on the subject of being outward-looking – that we have people of many different cultures who come to share life and worship with us here. So, to develop in one aspect of being outward-looking, we don't necessarily have to travel very far. We may just have to work at knowing and

understanding each other at a deeper level – going beyond the pleasantries, to finding out what really makes each other tick.

Those of you who took part in the Lent course- *Strangers Recognised* – will remember that this was the theme of the first session – that, in a sense, even in a congregation where we're all very friendly to each other, and many of us feel we know our fellow-worshippers well, there's a sense in which we are still strangers to each other to some extent, in the ways in which we're different. That's true in any congregation – even in one where all the members are of a single nationality. How much more true that is in a community like St Mark's, and Newnham generally where different cultures may make us more diverse and puzzling to each other in our reactions than we fully take on board.

One final thought about the story of the disciples on the Emmaus road – this time, a thought coming from personal experience. Aren't there times when you and I have been preoccupied and turned in on ourselves – perhaps because of a grief, a pain, a fear or a worry, or on the other hand, perhaps

because of some excitement or anticipation which is filling the mind – but anyway, we've been inwardly preoccupied, and someone or something has come along, and got us to raise our eyes away from ourselves? Do you know that kind of experience? And it can be a comfort in trouble, if only because it's a distraction. But it can be more than a comfort and a distraction to look outwards, too. Sometimes it can be a *revelation* - the very thing we need, to help us forget ourselves, or see our own preoccupations in a new light, or to understand the very thing we needed to know in that situation. I hope you know what I'm talking about. And I hope you can identify that experience in the story of those two, downcast disciples plodding along the Emmaus road, turning their loss and grief over and over in conversation – until a stranger came and demanded their attention, lifting their eyes to something new, and making their hearts burn with understanding.

Well – if that sort of experience can be true for individuals, surely it can be true for churches, too? Christian communities can become turned-in on their own preoccupations, whether they take the form of troubles, or even of happy projects and activities.

And it may sometimes be necessary for someone or something to demand they turn their attention outwards, and find the truth and perspective of Christ coming to them from some surprising *other* place or *other* voice. This is something else to ponder as we reflect and pray about the ways and extent to which our church is outward-looking.

On the questionnaires you were given, there are some pretty straightforward issues raised to help you to 'score' St Mark's, and to make observations which can help us in our planning for the future. My guess is that those of you who wish to return the questionnaire may well score this church 'high', on the issue of being outward-looking, just as you scored us pretty high on the issue of being 'energised by faith'. We do look out to the world, through our charities of the month, through our link with the diocese of Gombe, and in our regular intercessions; we do serve our local community in various ways, both as individuals, and as a church. I know that in the past there have been occasions when people have been able to talk in various contexts about the ways in which the Gospel affects daily life – particularly working-life. (Perhaps you may

feel it's time to take a fresh look at that issue in some way. I'd value suggestions about how best to do it.) But – as I've said, as far as the issues raised on the questionnaire are concerned, you may feel that the straightforward answer is to score St Mark's 'high' as far as being 'outward-looking' is concerned. And that means that there's much to celebrate in our life together – and I do celebrate it. But I hope that by coming at the issue this morning in some slightly different ways, all inspired by the story of the walk to Emmaus, I've been able to suggest that there may be more to this issue of being 'outward-looking' than immediately meets the eye. So it's worth pondering this issue as deeply as we can.

May I thank those of you who returned the questionnaires on last week's theme, with some very thoughtful answers. If you didn't, but would still like to, there isn't a time limit for returning your response on any particular topic, and the sheets from each week will remain available in the Narthex together with the sermons, or notes on the themes –which will also be on our website. Meanwhile, I commend to your reflection and prayer the theme which we have

shared this morning – what it might mean to grow in being an 'outward-looking' church.