

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

3 of Easter A 8th May 2011

1Peter 1.17-23 Luke 24.13-35

The Second Mark of Mission: To teach, baptise and nurture new believers

How long have you been a Christian?...

Some of you may have a very definite answer to that question, because you can remember a definite time of conversion and commitment to Christ. Others of you may say something like , ‘All my life...perhaps...but I’ve learnt a lot about it as I’ve gone along.’ Others may reply , ‘I try to be a Christian, but I’m not a very good one...’

But, whoever you are - how long have you been on this road? Surely you have some wisdom from experience that you could pass on to other travellers?

Think of what it is to be a parent: nobody knows all about how to do that. (Well, perhaps some people who’ve never had children have very good ideas about it - but out of the window lots of those very good ideas go, when *real* children come along...) Nearly all parents feel challenged by their role, and yet, from very early days, new parents find it helpful to get together with others who are equally novices in the role, to share their experience, to pass on tips about works for them – whether it’s sleep patterns or potty training - and sometimes just to support each other as they explore territory which is a new adventure every

day. It’s a pity that that support which new parents often e each other in post-natal groups and parent and toddler sessions isn’t always carried on into later stages of parenting. We sometimes retreat into our privatised family life, and don’t like to admit we’re finding it hard to cope, especially once we stop meeting around the school gate...

Fellow travellers are often the best teachers. It’s good, and to some extent essential, to have experts to consult and learn from, of course; but it’s also good to have someone who’s walking beside you, and seeing the world from where you stand. You can share the lessons of experience and trial and error in language that makes sense to you both, and be built in confidence, which is a really important fruit of helpful teaching..

The second ‘mark of mission’, according to our Anglican Communion, is when the Church ‘teaches, baptises and nurtures new believers’. What’s your role in that? How long do you have to be a Christian before you can be a teacher?

I spoke last week about the first mark of mission ‘to proclaim the good news’. That is, to *tell* people about Christianity and what it means to us and might mean to them. We thought together about how difficult we sometimes find that – taking the word of the Gospel outside the church doors, letting conversation about it become part of our normal relationships, being witnesses, undertaking regular and committed prayer for people, that they may come to faith. I hope we all went away with the sense that proclaiming the Gospel, *telling* people

about it, is the responsibility of every single one of us, not just of some experts or church leaders.

Now we have to think about what comes after – what telling the good news might point towards: and, again, we all share in responsibility for the *teaching* that comes after the telling. Coming to faith usually isn't a sudden experience for people: some special moment or significant conversation may open up a window of interest, but most people will want to think hard and long about the claims of the Gospel, argue them out with themselves and other people, have things explained and – above all – see what a life of faith looks like in action. We can all share in accompanying people on their journey into faith; we can all be teachers, even if we feel we're only a step ahead of those who are on their way in – or scarcely even that. Not having all the answers, or even all the information, certainly doesn't disqualify you from an important role in teaching and nurturing faith, and encouraging people towards baptism, confirmation, or whatever step of commitment would be significant for them.

One of the important truths we have to take really seriously is that the prime teacher, when someone is coming to faith, is Christ himself, through his Spirit. It's with him that a serious seeker is having the inner conversation, not with us. So, sometimes, even if what we say and convey with our words seems very inadequate and incomplete, something remarkable is happening – the inquirer, the seeker, is listening to a music that is 'behind the words'. We have outwardly offered an occasion to think of the things of God – but Christ is inwardly filling

that occasion with a calling, a compulsion and a meaning that we can only hint at.

Think of that walk to Emmaus that we heard about in our Gospel: Cleopas and the other traveller had been *told* the news of the empty tomb, and something about a message given by angels. They were taking the opportunity of their journey to discuss it, albeit that they were each as puzzled as the other. And as they travelled, Christ came into their situation and filled the message they'd heard outwardly with an inward meaning they'd never imagined – so much so, that their hearts burned within them as they walked.

It's a striking image, isn't it – the heart burning within? I expect we all know the sensation it describes (and of course, I'm not talking about heartburn in the sense of indigestion!) But you know, I'm sure, that sense of anticipation, uncertainty, and excitement which grasps you as a physical feeling somewhere around your heart... this experience of the burning heart, the heart 'strangely warmed', as Wesley put it, it must have something to do with the what went on at Pentecost, the Spirit coming in tongues 'like fire'. People on tiptoe of expectation, receiving *something* – yet reaching out for more – even though they're not quite sure what that more might be, and where it might lead them.

It's really exciting to be alongside someone and see them have this experience of the heart burning within, as they're grasped by Christ. That's why it's good news for all of us that the call to teach, baptise and nurture is a corporate task for the whole church. It's not just the job of the clergy or the biblical and theological experts to walk the

road of discovery with those who are coming into faith. It shouldn't be assumed in a congregation that every so often the vicar will lay on confirmation or baptism classes, and go aside with the candidates – and eventually you, the congregation will be reminded of their names and asked to pray for them for a Sunday or two, and that's just about it...

I know that's how it has seemed in the Church of England for many years – but that pattern isn't the mark of a church in mission. A church which takes mission seriously will have active members of the congregation who are 'praying people in', are inviting them to take part in the conversations which may lead to faith taking fire; people who are accompanying inquirers and seekers in those conversations – those 'classes', to use a rather old-fashioned and very inadequate word – and who are sharing their own experience of faith in unforced conversation, both within those groups, and outside them. The modern liturgies for baptism and confirmation assume that candidates who are taking this step of commitment will have sponsors, whatever their age. We all know about godparents for babies: but a sponsor for an adult at baptism or confirmation is something else – someone who has been accompanying that person in their journey of faith, and who is now celebrating with them, as well as undertaking to go on being a companion and a friend.

The material I've used for inquirers and seekers over the last few years in this church is, as it happens, called the basic 'Emmaus Course', and it's a series of conversations based very much on the premise that people walk together

the way of discovery and faith – and that within that journey of sharing, Christ may reveal himself – the 'penny may drop', hearts may come to burn within. It's been good on some of these Emmaus courses to have established members of the congregation take part and share the journey, at my invitation. (And I'm not talking here about the Emmaus 'growth' groups we've been having on Sunday afternoons – they're something different, though equally good, to take people further along the path after they've become committed.) But, leaving those growth groups on one side, for the moment, I'd love us to move to a new level – to have members of the church actively taking part in inviting people to come on a basic course with them – that is, inviting people *into* 'teaching', as the next step beyond the 'telling' of the good news that we were thinking about last week. And, if we could make this mark of mission – teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers – central to our congregational life, (so much so that we were *all* disappointed if a year passed with no one new coming to faith for themselves in our company) – if we could make this teaching, this nurturing, this celebrating of the outward signs of commitment, something we all felt deeply involved in, then I think our congregational life would be transformed in some really significant ways. We would all make it our business to know the names of newcomers, who were at the stage of exploration, for example. And we'd pray for them. But more than that, we'd all feel a responsibility for each other on our faith journeys, as well as in a neighbourly way. We would *expect* the church to grow, both in numbers, and in spiritual depth – and expectation is an important part of faith. We'd all have a sense that we're on a continuing

adventure with the Spirit of God, and perhaps we'd know more frequently that exciting feeling of our hearts burning within. What would that do for our worship, I wonder?

As it happens, I shall be beginning to meet soon with a small handful of people who are thinking about the journey towards commitment. I shan't be using the Emmaus course material this time, but a small book which my husband, Malcolm wrote, called 'What do Christians Believe?' It would be wonderful to have some members of the long-standing congregation join us in those discussions: the witness you would give by sharing that journey would be more important than you might think. And later in the year there might be the opportunity for another course – maybe using the Emmaus material again – which Mark Scarlata is keen to run. Perhaps you could start praying people in for that course now?

Another thing which is starting next week is a course for young people, which might lead to baptism and/or confirmation – this something being done jointly with Trumpington, and it will be largely lay-led. Emma Hopegood, our joint Children's Worker, will be one of the leaders. But there might well be ways in which she and Sarah, the pastoral worker at Trumpington, could use other members of the two congregations to come into particular sessions, and share something of their Christian experience. If you think you could do that, do speak to Emma.

So, those are some things already in hand or in planning, which I commend to your prayers, and invite your support for. But as we go through this summer, and work

together on making a new Mission Action Plan, be thinking about how - reaching out into the future - we could better be a church which teaches, baptises and nurtures new believers. What one thing could each of us do? What ideas haven't we thought of yet? Where is God calling us to go along this exciting road?