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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Easter 3 ~ 30 April 2017

Well, here we are together at last. For both you and for me, it has been a long time since I was offered the post of parish priest of Christ Church last December. The appointment of a new priest for any church is a long and tricky process, shrouded in secrecy, which I have always likened to a sort of ecclesiastical Blind Date. A church has to entrust the appointment of their new priest to a very small group of people and the first that the whole congregation really gets to know of who has been appointed is when that person is licensed by the Bishop. I hope you won't be echoing the true story of another church where a member of the congregation was heard to mutter: 'We don't know who the new Vicar will be but we shan't like him'.

But last Wednesday the Bishop asked the congregation, many of whom do not yet know me, 'will you welcome your new parish priest'. Thankfully you did – and very warmly – but it was, let's face it, a real act of faith on your part to give your approval that this man standing here this morning is the right appointment for you. What a risk. What a gamble. But perhaps it is the same on both sides for me as well as for you. Is this a man we can see as our new parish priest? Is this a group of people that I will be happy to work with?

I mentioned Blind Date – but perhaps this morning is even more similar to the new Channel 4 programme First Dates when a restaurant is filled with singles on their first dates – together with the forty remote-controlled cameras which pick up their every movement, gesture and word. For me I am aware that there are dozens of pairs of eyes looking at me now, weighing me up, perhaps judging me against past Vicars, perhaps wondering why it is this man who has been appointed. I'm afraid that there is no 3 or 6 month probationary period in the Church – so here we are, all in this together. I'm not perfect and possibly neither

are you – but here we are to worship and work and witness together in this tiny part of God’s kingdom in which we are set.

But in the whole appointment process there is of course one crucial element that I haven’t mentioned and that is that we have trusted God to get it right – both for me and for you. It is God in whom we have our trust.

In times past of course the church relied on its clergy to lead and to do everything – but today it is estimated that the church is now made up of just 2% of clergy and 98% lay people. You have more than weathered the last year for indeed the congregation has flourished and grown during the vacancy – and that remarkable fact is down to all those of you who have worked together tirelessly. For I am of course very conscious of the work that has been undertaken not just by the elected members of the church council, led by the churchwardens, but of course by dozens of you who have also played your part in helping to sustain the life of Christ Church – and even those of you who may be less physically active these days have been able to pray.

But please. Please don’t stop what you have been doing just because there is now a vicar in post! We/I still need everyone to continue to contribute what they can to the life of Christ Church – for the church is the people of God cooperating together to worship and work and witness in the name of Christ. And it is that word ‘cooperation’ which is crucial. There is absolutely no place in any church for argument, disagreement and conflict. Yes, we may express our opinions but that needs to be done in a generous and Christ-like way. In his diary entry for 2006, Alan Bennett records a checkout woman at M + S saying to him “There shouldn’t be any religion. There should just be people being nice to one another”. Well there is religion and we can still be nice to one another!

By a happy coincidence, my first Sunday with you has the wonderful Easter story of the road to Emmaus. Luke 24, the final chapter of his book, is broadly an account of one day in the life of Jesus – from what happened early in the morning on that first day of the week, moving on to what happened later that extraordinary day.

The chapter includes the story on the road to Emmaus – of the two disciples walking the seven miles from Jerusalem and talking as they went until unexpectedly they were joined by a stranger who talks with them in considerable detail about the events and who turned out to be their risen Lord, recognised by them when “he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them”. Then, as Luke records it, “their eyes were opened and they (finally) recognised him”. But Jesus disappeared from sight – and so these two rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the Eleven what had happened on the road and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

This account from Luke should give us great hope and encouragement, for it assures us that the risen Christ still walks with us even if we can't see him, that in this breaking of the bread Christ can still open our eyes.

It all goes to remind us that churches, communities of Christians, do not stand still – they are changing all the time. Numerically, some grow, some decline – but nevertheless they all do change. What I believe we have to do is to be people who are constantly looking ahead, moving forwards to what is before us, rather than constantly looking over our shoulders at the past. The exciting and sometimes scary fact is, of course, that we really do not know what lies ahead – which is why the human in us usually prefers to look back to the past – it feels safer and less daunting. Yet the story of the road to Emmaus and the appearance of Jesus to those first disciples should encourage us to do three things –

- Always to move forwards;
- Always to move forwards together;
- And always to move forwards together in faith and hope and love.

Promises are very much the currency of what is being reported in the acres of newsprint covering the General Election. Politicians are falling over themselves to make promises about our futures so that they can capture our votes. But almost every member of the public interviewed does not trust them not to go back on their election pledges. It's a real human dilemma. Who can we trust?

Jesus of Nazareth has never gone back on his promises. He is the one constant in the lives of many faithful Christians who still trust his word. He promised: “I am the way and the truth and the life”. So I encourage us all to..

- Always to move forwards;
- Always to move forwards together;
- And always to move forwards together in faith and hope and love.

I am genuinely very excited by this new chapter in my life and that under God you and I have been brought together. I hope and trust you will support and encourage me as I work and witness and worship alongside you, as we seek to cooperate together. For my part you may be assured that I will do the best that I humanly can to be a good priest. But I know I can't do this in my own strength.

Someone wrote: “The task ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you”. “The task ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you”. And perhaps we can all say a quiet but confident ‘Amen’ to that.

Risen Christ, you filled your disciples with boldness and fresh hope. Strengthen us also to proclaim your risen life and fill us with your peace, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.