

EASTER 3

I have brought you all back an Easter present from the Lancashire/Cumbria border. It is from the Leighton Moss RSPB reserve, a sanctuary which became more famous after a TV series of 'Autumn Watch'. Chris Packham, I recall, got very excited about the local pies from the canteen there, as well as, of course, the amazing birds and wildlife. Do you know what it is? ...

And therein lies another story which Janice photographed on the day and Bob witnessed from the organ console. It was my very first funeral here, during Lockdown, for a very faithful choir member and, out of nowhere, a bat landed on my white surplus and insisted on staying there even as I went out down the aisle during the final organ voluntary, until I got outside! You know they are a protected and indeed, endangered species (rather like being a practising Christian) and when you see how tiny and vulnerable they are close-up, you begin to think of them differently. They do not deserve the bad press they so often receive. They need what we need as a Christian family: trust, affirmation, friendship and renewal...

(I am also looking for wise and wonderful volunteers to put up our new bat box in the best place in our churchyard, so do give me the nod over coffee if you can help?)...

Today's famous and memorable Gospel story is the one I would choose to take if it was the only one I *could* take – onto that famous desert island - along with my favourite Shakespeare play (it is his birthday today)! The Road to Emmaus has two 'compartments' (like our bat box) which are inseparable: The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Sacrament. Both, together, form the life and witness of the worshipping Church: 'yesterday, today and for ever' as we prayed and marked the new Easter Candle behind me at our Easter Vigil.

We should not be surprised or disappointed that the first disciples did not recognize their Lord and ours so soon after the harrowing

days which led up to Calvary, or the confusion and fear which resulted afterwards. But clearly, the more the risen Jesus said, and discussed, and remembered, with those closest to him along the way, the more they were drawn in, attracted, and affirmed. The scriptures open up and open out in the way that the best play or novel do. There is a structure and form and wonder to each and every narrative. There is a purposefulness to the kind of biblical teaching which not only resonates with us but also inspires us.

The road to Emmaus is the same road that we are on with Jesus beside us as our friend, companion and guide. With all the patience and understanding of the best counsellor and the gentle wisdom of the best theologian, the Word of God is unwound like a bundle of wool, and slowly unpicked, until that exciting 'eureka' moment – Christ is risen in our midst and His voice is recognised and enjoyed once more.

It is the same with the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread: Christ is our Risen Host inviting us into closer fellowship with Him. This Eucharist and every Eucharist is a regular meal to be tasted, savoured, and enjoyed, for our common nourishment and refreshment. And yes, I am going to say this more publicly, it is the best and richest part of any funeral arrangements that you can make, as a practising Christian.

A 'Requiem' is not just the preserve for a local Choral society or professional concert; it is actually a re-enactment of today's Emmaus story and our Lord's invitation on the night before he died – to 'do this in remembrance' of Him - whenever and wherever we can. A funeral which only has one half of the Emmaus story and misses out the other is very much the poorer in its form and content and meaning. The more people who see what we do and why on a regular basis, Sunday by Sunday, through Word *and* Sacrament, the more we learn to live and die by this Easter story: of hopeful

encounter and real presence. The Emmaus encounter, with all its promises of trust, affirmation, friendship and renewal is a true tale to be revealed, treasured and shared for all time. I think of that poem which the philosopher and activist, Simone Weil, described as ‘the most beautiful poem in the world’ – ‘Love (111)’ by George Herbert:

“Love bade me welcome....

George Herbert, who served a small rural parish for three years just outside Salisbury, died at the tender age of 39 years, in 1633. When he was dying he sent a collection of his handwritten English poems, which had never been published in his lifetime, to Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding with a note: ‘If he think’, wrote Herbert, ‘it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not, let him burn it’. We should be very grateful that Ferrar did not go anywhere near the fireplace.

In the name of ...

AMEN.