

WESLEY'S CHAPEL

SUNDAY 30th APRIL 2017

WHEN THEN BECOMES NOW

In the early 1980s I led a number of church members on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land; if you have been yourself you might be able to picture the scene I describe. It was a Sunday evening and we drove a short way out of Jerusalem to the village of El Qubeibeh, the traditional site of Emmaus. After visiting the church there, we walked up onto the terrace above it, where a table and chairs were set out. There was no wind, the evening air was soft and warm; from the height we were we could look out over all the land of Israel, and in the far distance we could see the Mediterranean Sea sparkling in the light of the setting sun. On a table we laid out a white cloth and placed on it bread and wine, as the two disciples had done 2000 years ago. We sang, 'Let us break bread together....', and read the Gospel story from Luke we have just heard.

We had our two then young children with us, about 7 and 9 years old, and in those days children did not receive the sacrament. But it seemed right to us and to the Holy Spirit, as it says in Acts, that they should for the first time receive the sacrament there at Emmaus. For me at least, as I watched their upturned faces and placed the bread into their young eager hands, something of the wondrous moment at Emmaus then, was with us, now. In the sacrament of sharing bread and wine, then becomes now.

At the very heart of our worship and our reading of the Bible there should be a link, a living bridge between then and now. In the Emmaus story there was wondrously a living link between the crucified and risen Christ and the two disciples, as their unrecognised guest broke the bread. He may have done this many times before with them and suddenly they saw the link. They had not understood his explanation on the road, but they shared a meal everything changed.

And sharing meals is so important. I once scandalised some members of my congregation, and it was as large as this one, when I said I could accurately divide them into two groups – those with whom I had shared a meal, particularly if it had been in their home, - and those with whom I had not. To share a meal with someone creates an indissoluble link – you know them and relate to them in a new way.

Try looking round and reflecting on this yourself. Who have you shared a meal with in this congregation? When you have shared a meal with someone, when you have broken bread together, there is a shared bond, a shared memory, a shared relationship which is not there with someone with whom you have not shared a meal.

(After I had shared this observation with my congregation I did notice that Judith and I had an increase in the number of invitations from members of the church to their homes for a meal – they wanted to be numbered among the sheep!).

Sitting here in the congregation this morning is someone I met here a few weeks ago, whom I last knew in 1970, 47 years ago when I was a new probationer and he had just joined the Scouts. After a very happy reunion here in the porch, guess what we have arranged? After this service we are going to share a meal together and re-establish a bond with him and his family. As we break bread together that, - and I use the word carefully- that sacramental bond will be made. We and our wives will both remember and recall that we have broken bread together - and then becomes now.

But let me return to the Emmaus story. Some years ago, when attending a liturgical conference in Sicily, we had the opportunity to visit the Cathedral at Monreale, a world famous church. The part of the visit that sticks with me, in this massive solid church built by the Normans in 12th century, was the sight of a wall mosaic of the story of Emmaus. Unusually it consists of four scenes, almost like a story-board for a film.

In the first scene the two disciples are walking along dejectedly, shoulders bent, approaching the inn. Behind them walks the unrecognised risen Lord. Underneath are the words, in Latin, ‘What were you saying to each other as you walk and are so sad?’

In the second scene the three of them are at the inn by the table with bread and wine on it, the disciples are on either side. Standing between them is the risen Lord holding his hand out blessing the bread. There is a look of amazement on their faces, and the words underneath are ‘They recognised him in the breaking of the bread’.

The third scene is almost identical, the two disciples are at the table. The bread and wine are still there, but between them is a blank wall where the risen Christ had been. Their bodies are lifted up. On their faces are looks

of joy and wonder, and beneath are the words ‘Did not our hearts burn within us?’ (They were more than just strangely warmed).

In the last scene the two disciples have returned to Jerusalem and are greeting the other disciples. You almost feel there is a competition between the two groups to get their good news in first. ‘Listen to us’ ‘No, listen to us’. The Jerusalem disciples got their good news in first, ‘The Lord has truly risen and he has appeared to Simon Peter’. You can just hear a sort of early liturgical response, ‘And we’ve seen him too!’ In the presence of the Risen Lord, then becomes now.

And it was the purpose of those mosaics to tell a story from the Bible to people who could not read or write, the vast majority of the population, so the then of the Bible became the now of their Christian experience. Just as a film and television programme today bring words written on a page months or years ago, bursting into life on the screen now. We all know how we can be affected by a play or film on television.

Imagine how wonderful if the same could happen with the Bible?

I’m not thinking here about films of the life of Christ, or Moses or Noah. I’m thinking about bringing the stories of the Gospel, written then, alive to us now, here in church.

A couple of months ago I attended another liturgical conference (liturgy is about what we say and do in worship). The conference was entitled (and hold on), ‘Biblical Performative Criticism’. The word ‘criticism’ means study and analysis, so the conference was about looking at ways the Bible is performed, read, spoken or used in church, and the effect it has on the congregation. Let me give some examples:

In some churches, like ours, the Bible is solemnly carried in and out?
Why?

In some churches, for the Gospel reading, everyone stands. Why?

Sometimes it is carried into the centre of the church. Everyone turns to face it, so the community of faith turns to and surrounds the reading of scripture. Why do they do this?

In some churches its words are projected onto a screen as well as read, or members follow in a pew Bible. Does that help?

And are you aware that in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, many URC and Baptist churches (and many other churches around the world), the same passages are read Sunday by Sunday. Have you ever heard of the Revised Common Lectionary, described by some as the greatest ecumenical act of the last four centuries? We may sing from different hymn sheets, but we all read the same Bible passages over a three year cycle.

In some churches the Bible is well read by well prepared readers, in others - well.....

These are all examples of how the Bible is performed in church.

Has it ever dawned on you, why DO we read the Bible in church? We can read it at home on our own. In the context of this sermon I would suggest that, reading it as the community of faith together, we are drawn together as one in experiencing it. We experience together a unity around the Bible. We are asking that for all of us that - then becomes now. We enter the world of the Bible and we live the words of the Bible within us. Then things can happen. Then becomes now.

Biblical performative criticism is not just about how we use the Bible, it is also about how we are influenced by the words. Certain words, in particular contexts are performative. They don't just say something, imparting information, they DO something. Minister says, 'I baptise you....', something happens. Or when she says, 'I pronounce you man and wife', something has happened to you.

The words have performed something. Very importantly, in the context of regular worship, when the minister pronounces the words of Jesus in the Absolution or words of Forgiveness, 'Your sins are forgiven', they are performative, Christ speaks to you, as then becomes now, your sins ARE forgiven.

In the same way the artist who made the four mosaics at Monreale wanted them to DO something to illiterate people who looked at them. The people who first told the stories of Jesus wanted their story-telling to do something. They said in effect, 'we are not just telling you a story because it is interesting. It's Good News and we want it to change your life.' The purpose of the telling of stories of Jesus is to change your life. The words are intended to be performative.

What happened to you as you listened once again to the story of Emmaus? One writer on PBC wrote an article with the provocative title, 'How does the Bible reader know when to smile?' Well, if this story does not make you smile – nothing will.

Can't you imagine how the pre-gospel story tellers acted out the poor, sad, disciples? How their listeners must have laughed when the disciples said to the hidden Christ, 'Are you the only person who doesn't know what has been happening?'

How they told him everything that had happened to him as if he didn't know!

How they were blind to his explanation of what had happened!

How they almost missed the opportunity to share a meal with him!

And it was when he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to them they saw! Then became now.

All those years ago when we visited Emmaus with our young family we read and spoke those words. They became performative, doing something. As I distributed the bread I said the words, 'This is the body of Christ.' Then and now they are performative, something happens as the words are spoken. Then becomes now.

May it be so for you.