

**Synod Sermon 2013**  
**As they were walking.....**

*Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.*

<sup>14</sup> *They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.*

<sup>15</sup> *As they talked and discussed these things with each other,*

*Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;*

<sup>16</sup> *but they were kept from recognizing him.*

<sup>17</sup> *He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"*

*They stood still, their faces downcast.*

<sup>18</sup> *One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"*

<sup>19</sup> *"What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.*

<sup>20</sup> *The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;*

<sup>21</sup> *but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.*

*And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.*

<sup>22</sup> *In addition, some of our women amazed us.*

*They went to the tomb early this morning*

<sup>23</sup> *but didn't find his body.*

*They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.*

<sup>24</sup> *Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus."*

<sup>25</sup> *He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!*

<sup>26</sup> *Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"*

<sup>27</sup> *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

<sup>28</sup> *As they approached the village to which they were going,*

*Jesus continued on as if he were going farther.*

<sup>29</sup> *But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.*

<sup>30</sup> *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks,*

*broke it and began to give it to them.*

<sup>31</sup> *Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.*

<sup>32</sup> *They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"*

<sup>33</sup> *They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem.*

*There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together*

<sup>34</sup> *and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon."*

<sup>35</sup> *Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.*

(Luke 24:13-35)

There is a little phrase that is repeated several times, in one form or another, throughout the Gospels: 'as they were walking.'

'As they were walking' - Jesus saw two brothers....

'As they were walking' - Jesus met a man born blind.....

'As they were walking along the road' a man said to him "I will follow you wherever you go"....

'As Jesus was walking' - in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him.....

One Sabbath - 'as they were walking' - through the grain fields, his disciples began to pick some heads of grain.

Then there's the occasion when the disciples were 'discussing' which one of them would be the greatest in

the Kingdom and the debate was taking place 'as they were walking.'

There is absolutely no doubt that some of the most profound encounters happened 'as they were walking.'

It was a phrase that came to have huge significance for me back in 2009 when I walked the boundaries of the Diocese. Every day there was a 'wow' moment when I was so aware of the presence and power of God. Yet none of these moments were significant in themselves and more than likely would have been missed if I hadn't taken the time to step out of the normal routine of ministry and go walking.....

And probably this little phrase would have remained just that - a personal reflection of a 40 day journey except for the fact that it kept coming back to me over and over again throughout my Sabbatical. I had a very strong sense that this phrase contained both a spiritual and a missional challenge to this Synod.

As they were walking....

There is absolutely no doubt that some of the most profound encounters found in the Gospels took place as Jesus and the disciples were walking in and around the countryside and towns of Galilee; through the region of Samaria; and in and around the city of Jerusalem.

They came across people who had been ostracised from their communities and from their families because they suffered from leprosy; because they were paralysed; because they had been bleeding for years; because they were plagued by demons; because they were despised neighbours.

It's also true, of course, that as they were walking they encountered opposition from the religious hierarchy of the day who questioned their motives and their message.

Maybe it's stretching the point a little too much but it seems that the people they encountered as they were walking were those he had talked about at the very beginning of his ministry when he sat in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is on me*

*Because he has anointed me*

*To proclaim good news to the poor*

*He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

*And recovery of sight for the blind*

*To set the oppressed free*

*To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

The gospels are so clear that, as they walked, ministry happened.

This was reinforced very powerfully for me a few years ago when I had gone back over to Blenheim to attend a funeral. Afternoon tea had been turned on at the 'Clubs of Marlborough' – which are on the banks of the Taylor river, not that far from Nativity. Usually I would have driven down there and parked in the club's car-park, ready to head home to Nelson. But on this occasion I left the car at Nativity and walked down to the afternoon tea.

When it was over I headed back to where I had left the car and I encountered a young man coming toward me, walking into town.

I knew this young guy by reputation. He was a male prostitute and you would often see him hanging around the male toilets in Seymour Square – day and night. He had one of those faces that seemed to be a mirror to his lifestyle – he was missing several teeth.

Anyway, as he came close to me he said 'Hello Father' – he obviously had some Catholic heritage somewhere in there. I greeted him by name and then he said to me – with absolutely no prompting (and in language that I can't repeat here) - "I've been real bad."

I looked right into his eyes and simply responded "I know."

He then went on "I've been into some real bad stuff."

And I simply repeated what I had said a few seconds earlier, "I know you have."

But then he added, "But I do believe in God you know."

What an opening!

I was still churning over in my mind how I might respond to this opening when I heard myself saying to him,

"I'm sure you do. But do you know what's even more powerful? The fact that God believes in you and loves you."

Where did that come from? I was still searching for a clever way of inviting him to turn his life around when I found myself saying words that were not mine.

'What is even more important is that God believes in you and loves you.'

We both just stood there for a few moments with no more words – you could see the impact in his eyes. And then he said "Okay Father, see you" and he headed off into town.

I ran into this young man again a couple of years ago – as Bob Barnes and I were wandering around Hunters Garden Marlborough and he said to me, "Father, I'm going to church now. I've joined the Salvation Army."

Now I don't know if his lifestyle has changed. He certainly looked different – his eyes were no longer furtive.

But I was left wondering what would have happened if I had taken the car that day (as I usually did) instead of walking.

I guess there's a danger of making too much of this little phrase but I'm not so sure because I sometimes wonder if we've lost the ability or the motivation to walk among the people as Jesus and the disciples did.

A church that is maintaining the institution is a church with an inward focus whereas a missional church gets out and goes walking. In this day and age an institutional church's greatest tools for ministry are the computer and the office desk while a missional church buys walking shoes. An institutional church sets up social service structures and pays professionals to respond to the needs of the community. A missional church gets out meets the community. An institutional church does evangelism by advertising its programmes. A missional church does it through relationship – it goes walking.

And this is the first challenge – and it's as much of a challenge to me personally as it is to you, because so much of my ministry has been seduced by the pervasiveness of the social media.

Too often I have sat behind the computer and written sermons and reports. And only then have I started responding to the latest influx of emails – none of which can be answered in 5 minutes. I've totally resisted the temptation to engage in the facebook conversations that

I've been invited to be a part of. But it's still been a full day – at least that's what it has felt like – there's been no time to walk among the people.

Now contextual theologians will be quick to add that that was then; this is now. Walking was the only way to engage with people back then. We have a new way of engaging with the whole world. And they have a point.

The problem is that every single study done on the rise of 'social media' points to the superficiality of relationships and the increasing levels of isolation and loneliness.

As they were walking - Jesus met a man born blind....

As they were walking - some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk....

As they were walking – a large crowd followed and pressed around him and a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years.....

Jesus walked **among** the people.

That's the first point I want to make tonight.

The second one is similar – Jesus walked **with** the people.

Let's have a quick look at the Gospel passage that was read earlier.

It is three or four days after the crucifixion of Jesus and two followers of Jesus are wandering along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They are not two of the disciples – they are two of that wider group of followers. An early tradition names one of them as Cleopas but there is no name at all given to the second man. Suddenly Jesus appears to them - although they don't recognise him at that point.

Jesus' conversation with them is intriguing – commentators have had a field-day with it.

To paraphrase it quite a bit, Jesus seems to be saying to them, "You two guys were deep in conversation as you walked along and by the look on your faces it was quite a serious discussion. Can I join in? Do you want to share the gist of it with me?"

Jesus was right about the look on their faces. The Bible says that *'they stood still, their faces downcast.'* But they answer Jesus, "Are you a visitor to town or something? Haven't you heard all that's been going on in Jerusalem over the past few days?"

And Jesus asks, "What things?"

So they tell him....

In their retelling of the events these two characters reveal quite a bit about the particular agenda they had brought to the table as followers of Jesus and their scepticism at what the women had reportedly

experienced at the empty tomb. But that's a whole other story.

Jesus challenges their lack of understanding – coloured as it was by their own agenda. But then opens up scripture to them and beginning at Genesis he takes them on a journey through what is now our 'Old Testament' showing how everything points to Jesus. In other words he explains to them what we understand to be the 'metanarrative' of scripture.

It seems as though he was still teaching them as they approached the village that the two travellers had been heading to.

Jesus recognised this as their destination and had obviously said farewell to them and was preparing to carry on with his journey.

But these two hadn't had enough; as they share a little later, their hearts were burning as Jesus was speaking. They urged Jesus to stay. So he did. And as they sat at the table he 'broke bread.' That was the moment they knew and they understood.....

There's a goldmine of sermons in this whole encounter but I simply want to focus on the manner of the encounter as an example of the way Jesus interacted **with** people.

When he first appeared to them he eased his way into the conversation. Jesus asked to be included. Although some commentators have suggested that Jesus was playing games with them, and others believe that he was testing them, there is a third suggestion that Jesus was humbly standing back waiting to be included. Once he was fully included then, and only then, did he begin to reveal the truth to them. Grace first and truth second!

This suggestion is reinforced by their arrival at the village and Jesus, once again, didn't presume on them. He waited to be invited – in fact the language is very strong here – they urged him to stay.

This is typical of Jesus' encounters with people as he was walking.

Firstly, he waited to be invited to respond to the blind, the deaf, the demon possessed and the paralysed. Look again at his encounter with a Samaritan woman in the midday heat.

And secondly, once he was asked, he responded with both grace and truth but it was always grace before truth.

There is a sense of Jesus' total identification with each of the people he encounters on his journeys. There is no sense of pity – it is always compassion. It is empathy rather than sympathy.

And this is the second challenge because the church seems to have lost the ability to engage with people in the community around us.

We are hesitant in asking to be involved.

We don't know how to balance grace and truth: we either leave the truth part out altogether in a desire to be inclusive or we share it in ways that are totally inappropriate to the situation.

And finally, I'm not sure that we know how to fully identify with those we meet as people, just like us, are loved by God.

My prayer partner was a funeral director and he used to comment to me on the massive swing away from the church funerals to funerals in their chapels or in private homes; from clergy to celebrants. His observation after attending so many funerals in churches was that the church appeared unable to break out of its formal way of doing things and actually identify with people in times of deep sadness in ways that were relevant to each situation. They weren't looking for someone who would organise the funeral for them - they were looking for someone who would understand.

Jesus walked among people  
And he walked with people.

Last week a young woman in the Diocese asked me what I was going to be speaking about at Synod. So I told her that I was thinking of reflecting on the little phrase in the gospels 'As they were walking' and the reality that much of the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus flowed from these encounters.

She then told me of an experience she had had the day before – Monday before last when she went for a walk up Walters Bluff with two of her children. As they were walking along the top she met a lady coming toward her and they exchanged greetings. But this young woman felt God was nudging her to do a little more than simply greet – to stop and talk – even though this was probably not an easy choice with two young children.

But she stopped and had a chat with this woman whom she had never met. In the course of the short conversation this woman said that she was struggling because she had sciatica that was affecting her leg. She had struggled with it for three months and had taken days off work because of the pain.

The young woman asked tentatively if she went to church at all, and the answer was, "Well I used to but I haven't gone for a long time."

"But you believe in God?" she asked.

And the answer was yes.

So the young woman said “Would you let me pray for the pain in your leg?”

The answer was immediate. With a look of joy crossing her face she answered ‘Yes’, “Yes I’d really like that.”

So there, on the top of Walter’s Bluff, she prayed for this woman she had never met.

She then added that her church was running a women’s seminar in a few weeks and she’d drop a leaflet into her letterbox. Then they continued on their walks having met and prayed and exchanged names and addresses....

I have never had anyone refuse the invitation to be prayed for – not in any situation.

And it’s when we are praying that people most clearly discern whether we truly identify with them or are simply pushing our own agenda!

As they were walking....

I think this is a key characteristic of a missional church. But it is not something that we easily embrace.

At the end of 2008 when I floated the idea of walking the boundaries of the Diocese someone asked me whether this was a good use of the Bishop’s time.

I actually couldn’t answer the question at the time. But after I had completed the walk I knew the answer.

But it leaves me with an even greater question. What would my ministry look like if I shut down my computer for a day, locked the car, put on my walking shoes and went out and met people?

How about asking ourselves when we last prayed for someone we didn’t know – outside our familiar church setting?

I can almost hear some people in some places say that its all very well for others, but for them faith is a personal thing.

Yes, Christianity is a very personal thing – it demands a personal response – but when did it ever become private?

I hope the answer isn’t – when it became Anglican!

What would our church look like if every one of us honestly asked these questions?

As they were walking Jesus met....

And he loved

And he had compassion

And he healed

And he restored

And he redeemed

And he renewed

Let’s pray.....