

REFLECTION FOR EASTER 3 / AGM SUNDAY | 30.04.2017

Of all the Resurrection stories, the appearance of Jesus to the crestfallen disciples, trudging the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, could not be more appropriate for our AGM Sunday.

Like us, the disciples were looking backwards. They were talking to each other about the three years of Jesus' ministry; they were picking out bits of his teaching which had given them hope – talked about people he had healed and all those arguments with the Pharisees. Odd bits would have made them feel good but Luke's account tells us that their overall feeling was downbeat. Despite their optimism throughout their time with Jesus, what did they have to show for it now?

One of the books I am reading at the moment is unlike anything I have ever read before. Not only is it medical (which I don't do!) it is about the treatment of patients with serious cancers, facing difficult decisions about what to do in their last stages of life. It is written by an American Indian doctor, Atul Gawande, and is so beautifully constructed, so full of interesting and positive stories, that I have persevered with it despite all the blow-by-blow medical descriptions that are included in nearly every page.

One of the things he is discussing at the moment is the way people cope with pain. In a trial, patients were asked to describe the pain they are enduring on a 1-10 scale – and then asked to say how bad the process had been afterwards.

The point that Dr Gawande is making is that even if people have endured really terrible pain during the course of the procedure, if the pain at the end isn't too bad then the patients say that, overall, the treatment was OK. But if the pain – overall - was less, but the level of trauma at the end was really difficult to bear, then patients will say that the whole operation was terrible. It was the last bit that really counted for them.

And this is how it was for the disciples. They could stand alongside Jesus through the rough and tumble of his three year ministry – including the times when he was nearly stoned and all the times the priests turned on him.

But their very last memory of Jesus was of him dying on the cross – and that had meant that they felt compelled to re-write their association with the preacher from Nazareth – and, here on the Emmaus Road, they were saying to one another what a waste of time it had all been.

Is it any wonder that Jesus got fed up with them?! So many wonderful things, spread out over weeks and months and years: and all those events count for nothing because the disciples are locked into their memories of the last day, the last event.

And we are like that too. Whatever miracles Jesus has achieved among us over the last twelve months, the temptation is to forget those and remember the last thing that didn't go so well. The Church has been packed for so many events this year, not least the wonderful 140th celebrations last May and Easter morning at 10am – but also baptisms, weddings, funerals and any number of concerts like the Epiphoni Choir recital last September; yet we choose to focus instead on the penny numbers that came to Church on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in Holy Week because they were the most recent.

What our AGM is about, and of course what Jesus does with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, is to put all the bits of the jigsaw together and show us how, in the round and over the years, the inexorable power of God's kingdom is breaking through.

Of course we can't always see what's happening. Of course we tend to focus on the last thing that happened to us: but that is not God's way. To use the familiar passage from 1 Corinthians: *now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we shall see, face to face...*

Our ministry is about sowing seeds. Some will die, some will take years to germinate and other seeds will flourish in a way that we could never expect. The call is for us to walk this walk with Jesus alongside us, holding our heads up so that we don't miss any of the things he has to show us along the way.

So one more Indian story though not from the book.

There was a man who had to carry all his water from the well. He was poor and the water was heavy so he carried a pot on each end of a long pole. Unfortunately one of the pots was cracked so that when he got home, much of the water had seeped out of the crack along the road home. He would despair: all that effort and only a fraction of water left in the pot on that end of his carrying pole.

Then someone took him by the hand. Look, they said. And his eyes looked at the road he travelled each day with his two heavy water pots. On one side of the road there was bare earth. But on the other there were beautiful flowers growing.

In his anxiety to get home he had never noticed them: never seen the good he was doing by giving away the water he had wanted to keep for himself.

The truth is that it is only by walking alongside Jesus will we stop just thinking about the last thing that happened to us and imagine that that is what is most important. Only with Jesus' help will we see the bigger picture – and learn to notice the flowers blooming around us, the result of what we have unknowingly given away as we go through the challenges of life.

