

Christ In You, My Christian Neighbour
Easter 2, Year B
19 April 2009

On Saturdays at the theological College I attended we often got in the College van and drove into North Yorkshire where we spent the day fell walking across the dales, a recreational journey that always seemed to end up at some rural pub that served real ale. A curious feature of this way of spending our day off was that the Principal and the Vice Principal often accompanied us. They were monks, part of the religious community just up the hill who ran the College, and they came with us not because they were supervising us but because they wanted to share in the pleasure of the day. But their presence brought with it a certain tension. While the Vice-Principal was popular and easy to get along with, the Principal had no small talk, was hard to understand because Parkinson's slurred his speech, and he tended to let his sharp mind and tongue skewer your more stupid and fatuous remarks.

When I look back on those day tramps I wonder why it never occurred to us to tell the staff not to come with us, that we would appreciate a chance to be by ourselves, and to let off steam and to talk freely out of earshot of them. But you have to understand that they lived with us, in rooms the same as us, right alongside us, used the same bathrooms (there were no en-suites), ate with us, and generally shared our lives in every way. So telling them to push off would have seemed like casting out one of our own.

All in all it was an intense form of community life. We were required to clean the baths, showers and toilets, to do the gardening, and to wait on tables for one another, not so much as a cost cutting exercise,

but because the people who set the College up thought it was important that we learn that being a Christian means serving one another in the small details of ordinary community living. And there was no escape from one another. Thirty to forty immature, intense, gossipy young men lived cheek by jowl with one another, with all the opportunities for misunderstandings and unkindnesses that go with this kind of pressure cooker existence.

I think I would find it hard to go back to that kind of institutionalised community living again. I have come to value my privacy and independence too much. I note how much I dislike the fact that at the annual clergy school we are usually required to sleep three or four to a bunkroom – there are some impressive snorers amongst the clergy of this diocese. But I think that those three years of Christian community living in West Yorkshire was a very helpful preparation for what would follow. For it was drummed into us that things were different now, that being a Christian meant learning the skills of community living, and that we meet Christ in one another in the Church.

I think it is a great shame that at many theological colleges there isn't much of a community life. This has been a persistent deficit at St John's Auckland where the staff lives separate lives to the students, where the students don't even have an evening meal together, where there are minimal requirements for shared Chapel worship, and where the College goes completely dead on the weekends.

Our first reading from the book of Acts makes it clear that Christian living is community living. The immediate response of the disciples to the resurrection is to form a community, and to begin

sharing their possessions. They experienced his risen presence powerfully when they met together for worship. Caring for members of the Christian community who are in need is a sign that his teaching has taken root in the collective life of his followers.

Like the community life of the College of the Resurrection, Mirfield, the Acts community in Jerusalem has an intense community life. In fact it would seem that it didn't manage to sustain it for that long. But it has exercised a powerful hold on the Christian imagination, inspiring other forms of Christian community life in every generation of the church's life. And it points to the vital truth that Christians are shaped and formed by our common life together, and are sustained and maintained in the faith by caring for one another in a variety of acts of common service as they look after one another day by day.

One of the biggest changes introduced by the liturgical movement to our Sunday Services is the kiss of peace at our Eucharist's. That is the moment half way through the service when we turn to one another and say, "the peace of Christ be with you." There was intense opposition to this new practise, usually on the grounds that people didn't like being touched in public, and resented being made to take part in what they saw as a compulsory display of mateyness. But at a deeper level what was being fought over here was whether Christianity is an individualised business in which privacy comes first as we come to Church to get our spiritual needs met, or whether we belong together in a community of faith in which we meet Christ in one another.

In fact that is what we are saying to one another as we greet one another in Christ's name – I acknowledge that I can discover him in you. We may not feel particularly warmly disposed to the particular Christian we are greeting – there may be struggles going on in our attempts to remain in community with that person – yet in a way that makes it more likely that we will find something of him in them. For Christ is always with us in our attempts to be together in his name. We are forming his body in the world as we do so. And sometimes he is there incognito in the person of the demanding, the exacting, the difficult, and the poor.

Even in the great 50 days between Easter and Pentecost the disciples sometimes had trouble recognising Jesus in his resurrection appearances, mistaking him at first for someone else. We too often fail to discern him at first in the person of one another. For each Christian has in a sense of part of the truth of who he is, a fragment of his collective reality, a piece of the jigsaw puzzle of the complete image that he makes up in each local Church assembled together to form him in that locality.

This means too that our social events, and our house groups, have a deeper purpose than just having a good time together. They are opportunities to catch a glimpse of that will of the wisp presence of the risen Christ as he turns up at disclosure moments in our experience of the common life we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ. He is here in one another if only we have eyes to see.

It is funny too how our view of people changes over time as a result of being together in the Church. As the years have gone by I have come to see that our so called difficult Principal at theological college

stood for some important priorities in the way the college was run, and had, without me recognising it at the time, given me some important gifts in my training as a priest. I thank God that I got back to Mirfield a few years ago while on study leave, and was able to say thank you to him in person for all that he had given me. It is just as well that I got around to doing that because he died a year or two later. He had mellowed into a rather loveable old man. Perhaps I am mellowing too as my life goes on in the Church.