

We want to see Jesus!

This statement or something very similar is at the heart of each Christian – for it is the statement which at some point we have yearned for in some way. For it is the seeing of Jesus, or depending on our tradition we might use the word God or Lord, that has drawn us to faith.

I have shared with some of you before that when I was a small child the church which I went to with my parents was very austere – even more austere than ours.

It was a traditional church shape with a very high ceiling and walls which were painted white. There were six very large arch shaped clear glass windows, 3 down each side, which let in lots of light (and lots of cold or heat depending on the season.)

The only ornate part of the building was a large wooden pulpit which the preacher would stand in and talk for a very long time. (Seriously we get off very lightly here at St Anne's).

But I have a strong memory of many of those sermons not for their content but because of what I could see. Because of the windows and the way the light reflected, and depending on the time of year when you looked at the preacher a halo would shine around their head – especially if they had lots of golden or grey hair! It was a trick of the light, but as a child I remember thinking – that must mean that Jesus is in them. God must be here.

For me, seeing Jesus was about seeing light – not just in church, but in the sunrise and sunset, after the storm, when I was afraid of the dark and the noise – Jesus was the light. So it seemed to figure that when light shone on a preacher then maybe Jesus was speaking. Sadly I suspect that often Jesus wasn't speaking – but I am sure God was with us, as God is with us now.

The reality is that so often we see an experience or an emotion rather than an identity. We see a potential and a relationship. I was struck by this again last weekend as I watched the final episode in this series of *Call the Midwife*. I don't want to spoil the episode for those of you who may see it later, but there was a moment when a young woman who had just had a baby turned to her neighbour 'Uncle Bob' who was developing Alzheimer's. The young mum said 'You don't know who I am Uncle Bob, do you?' and he replied 'No – but I know that you are someone we love!'

It was a very powerful moment, but it also struck a chord for me about how we see and understand so many things – it is not in the knowing, but rather in the relationship and the sharing of that relationship that we come to understand ourselves, and each other.

Today we share in our annual general meeting, a time when we report on what we have done in the last twelve months, but also reflect on what we might hope for in the future. I have started my report with a reflection which I had as I was preparing to preach at Christ Church last Sunday for Mothering Sunday. I was struck again by the power of the notion of love which the church offers. While we talk of experiencing God's love, and we often talk about individual experiences, but the love which God offers to us however is about our collective responsibility – our collective love! Our modern world so often is focused on the needs and responses of individual needs, and yet one of the great gifts of our faith is that it is grounded in our life as a community. It doesn't mean we always agree, or that we always succeed or even get what we would like. But it does mean we work together for the good of the community and endeavour to work for the good of the whole community, not just our own. This of course brings with it challenges which are not always easy to resolve, for example weighing up our desire to keep the building open and accessible to our local community, while at the same time ensuring that all who come into the building are safe.

This communal love is about offering a space which is a place that people might have a sense that we offer love, even if they don't know why or how. Or like those who come to Philip where people know it is a place they can come to ask questions.

As I share in my report, our building is a hub for many activities, on Sunday's as well as during the week. Over 400 people pass through the doors every week for a variety of activities and events. Our gift of hospitality is welcomed by many who find the space welcoming and safe. Our privileged place within this local community gives us many opportunities; but it also brings with it responsibilities. During 2017 this meant making lots of repairs as a result of flooding and break-ins at the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017. It has also meant we have needed to improve our security installing CCTV and carrying out risk assessments to ensure that to the best of our ability those who we welcome are safe and secure. The church is open every day of the week – which is a great opportunity and one we seek to make more of each day.

Our revised Mission Action Plan (MAP) continues to encourage us 'confidently share the love of Christ'. I regularly use the MAP, as do the PCC, to reflect on what we have achieved and what challenges we still have to face. Our links with, and support of, London Inter Faith Centre, Laurence's Larder, Salusbury World, Christian Aid Week, St Mungo's and Mbollet-Ba School in the Gambia continue to be evidence of our generosity as well as our commitment to supporting the vulnerable. This is not just in terms of money but especially will volunteers which come from within our community in helping all these projects.

We also continue to have good relational links with Salusbury School, Islamia School and Rainbow Montessori. We provide a safe environment for many local

community groups, who are coming to understand that we host them and welcome them. We have a true gift of hospitality and I think we should be proud of the fact that people feel safe in this building, and welcomed!

The networks we provide through My Move, Tea & Chat, London Inter Faith Centre, and occasional offices (funeral and feast days) have a lasting impact on our local community.

Prayer is at the heart of our life of faith, and public prayer is offered every day. We have Morning Prayer at 8.30am every day of the week, and evening prayer Tuesday-Thursday. Even if you cannot come to prayer – know that others are praying for the world and for this parish every morning and every evening. There is also a place in the chapel to leave prayer requests or light a candle.

All of this activity is about this very idea of how we understand and express God's love. How do we help one another to see Jesus – as the Greeks asked Phillip?

Our gospel reading today is a call to discipleship and challenges us not to forget who Jesus is! All of our readings today point us to a Jesus who is the promise of a new future (in Jeremiah) and the great high priest (in Hebrews) – the very real presence in Jesus which we are drawn too. In a sense, Jesus is our identity.

When the Greeks (in our gospel reading) arrived and asked to see Jesus, they were not coming to an ideology – they were drawn to an experience, a relationship, an understanding that draws on all senses and faculties. They did not know what the consequences of Jesus words to them would become – but they knew that something was happening that would change them and the world – and they wanted to find out more. This is an amazing gift and opportunity to offer anyone!

When we stand publicly as the people of St Anne's it is who we are as a community rather than all of the tasks we do which define who we are. Today in our Annual Meeting we will give thanks and celebrate all those things which we do collectively – from baking and child care to cleaning and personal care – and it is right that we celebrate these gifts and contributions, but as we acknowledge these things let us not forget what is the source of these things – and what it is that people come to us to see. In the end we are the church so that people can see Jesus, and they see Jesus in us!

The Jesus the Greeks meet prepares them for the journey in the coming days. A journey that will mean walking with Jesus to the Golgotha and watching Jesus die. It is a journey that seems to have no hope, and then when all seems to be lost – they will find an empty tomb – and they will see Jesus raise from the dead. But let's not be in too much of a hurry to reach Easter Sunday – rather let us take these days of passiontide which starts today to pray, to hear the bible, to share in the Eucharist together and to have courage that we are the people who have come to see Jesus –

5th Sunday of Lent – 22nd March 2015
Jeremiah 31: 31-34; Hebrews 5: 5-10 and John 12: 20-33

for it is in this relationship and the sharing of this relationship that we come to understand ourselves, and each other. Amen.