

The monastery

A story told by the Revd Dr Mark Butchers on Sunday 4th July 2010

at the 8am service at St Peter's Wolvercote and the 9.30am service at St Edward's School Chapel

For a change I'm going to tell a story this morning. It's not original and some of you may have heard it before. I enjoyed it when I first heard it, and it fits well with what lies at the heart of Christian faith: dying and rising, death and life, the belief that Jesus is life and that trusting in him and following him is life for us, be that life after death or a fuller life now.

The story is about a monastery. In many ways it was a very successful monastery. Over the years, it built up to about 100 monks and novices. They gradually expanded the buildings and developed the chapel from simple origins into an exquisite place to worship. The monastery became known as a haven of peace and prayer, which attracted people to come and stay for a few days on retreat.

The monks had an ever open door to travellers, offering a warm welcome, good food and a bed for the night. They were also involved in the local community – visiting the sick and housebound and exercising a teaching ministry. And they baked bread and sold it door to door in the local towns and villages. It was delicious bread and greatly enjoyed by all who bought it.

Everything felt very good about the monastery and the monks began to believe it would go on forever like this. But they were wrong. Gradually it began to change. Imperceptibly at first, the average age of the monks began to get higher. Novices had been applying in a steady stream, but gradually that became a trickle and then dried up altogether.

As the years went by, the number of monks dwindled. Those left became older and could not do as much. Their contact with the local community lessened. They gradually withdrew from visiting the sick and housebound in the local parishes. When their numbers went down to 20, they gave up their teaching ministry – the courses and lectures stopped. When there were only 10 of them, they decided they could no longer provide hospitality to travellers, and one of them put up a sign which said: "we regret we can no longer offer board and lodging". One thing they tried to keep going was selling the bread, both because it provided a bit of income and because it was at least one point of contact with the local community. But when there were only 3 of them left, they met together and decided, very sadly, that they could no longer go on making bread. They went round the local community telling everyone. They also decided to give the monastery one more year, and if nothing changed in that time, they would close it down.

One of the people who lived in a nearby village was the Bishop. He used to have deliveries of bread from the monks. He was sad to hear of their decision to stop making bread and sad also to hear that they might close the monastery in a year's time. He wrote to them to tell them this. He said he was particularly sad because he had always felt that the risen Christ was one of the 3 monks left at the monastery. The letter got each of the monks thinking. Each of them felt that the Bishop couldn't possibly mean them, so they wondered which of the other two he thought was the risen Christ.

First of all, there was Brother Anselm at prayer in the chapel. He reflected: it can't be Brother Bernard, he's such a fractious person. He's very quick tempered and you always have to tread a bit carefully with him. But then again, he's the one to take decisions when necessary. You can always rely on him for that and there have been some difficult ones recently. But surely the Bishop couldn't mean Brother George? He's a lazy swine; he spends half the day sitting at the window looking out, which is so infuriating. On the other hand, he does come up with good ideas. Everything is well thought through, and you do have to respect him for that.

Then there was Brother George, sitting at a window looking out into the garden. He too wondered whom the Bishop meant. He thought, he can't mean Brother Bernard – he's always so impetuous, he never stops to think. But at least he does get things done, and the monastery wouldn't have survived this long without him. Is it Brother Anselm then? That would be surprising. He thinks all there is to Christianity is being nice to people, he's so sugary. But on the other hand, he is always very patient with people and he does listen.

Finally there was Brother Bernard, digging frantically in the garden. He was thinking: it can't be Brother George. He gets on my nerves; he's so slow, it's painful; and the way he sits in that window all day is maddening! He has got one redeeming feature though: he can see all sides in an argument. As for Brother Anselm, he's far too wet; there's nothing to him. Surely Christ had much more about him than that? But I suppose he is very caring with the sick and people who come to the door.

In the end, none of the monks could decide which of the three of them the Bishop meant was the risen Christ. But they all respected him, so each of them decided to treat the others as if they were the risen Christ. Each of them resolved to try to see the better side of their fellow monks and respect them for that.

Towards the end of the year the monks had set themselves, there was a great storm. A traveller came to the monastery. He'd been years before and stayed there when the monks had taken people in. He walked up to the monastery and saw the sign saying, "We regret" But as he was soaked through, he decided to knock anyway and try his luck.

Brother Anselm answered the door, took pity on him and ushered him in. He was given a change of clothes and a hot meal and put to bed. He was told he could stay for a few days. Over those few days the traveller noticed how much things had changed, not for worse but for the better! He was very impressed by the love, care and respect the brothers showed towards each other and for him. He had never found that when he stayed there before.

At the end of those few days he asked to stay on and earn his keep by helping in the garden. The monks agreed and this encouraged them to let other travellers stay the night. Word soon spread and once again there was a steady stream of visitors to the monastery. Word also got around about the change in atmosphere at the monastery. A few people asked to stay. A few came on retreat. A few came to explore their vocation. And eventually, some years later, someone asked to become a novice.

In the midst of all this, the monks decided to start baking bread again. When the bishop got his first delivery of bread, he smiled to himself. Amen.