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Holy Tuesday 2018

John 12:20-26

Philip and Andrew

'Sir we would see Jesus'

Words of the Greeks to Philip

A few weeks ago, the actress Emma Chambers died at the tragically young age of 53. Amongst other roles, Emma played Alice Tinker, the lovely but rather dim verger in the Vicar of Dibley. Her death prompted various reruns of episodes of the series in her memory. The first series of the Vicar of Dibley came to our screens in 1994. That was the year I turned 18 and also the year that women were first ordained to the priesthood. At that time in my life, I had an idea that I might have a vocation to ordination, but it was a significant problem to me that I had never met a woman priest, or seen a woman behind the altar. Geraldine Grainger, the vicar of Dibley, became an important role model. There is much that is ridiculous about Geraldine. Her prayer life is a bit bizarre, her addiction to food in general and chocolate in particular is legendary. And yet, she is faithful and kind, she is funny and intelligent. She is not afraid to knock down the mighty from their seats and lift up the lowly, and, above all, she really does believe in what she is doing. Geraldine has a real vocation to Dibley, and because of that, the congregation, in general and Alice in particular flourish around her.

Geraldine Grainger, fictional as she was, was an important part of my journey of vocation. She was important because it was in her ordinariness that she was a good vicar. The people of Dibley responded to her and were changed by her because she was normal and fallible and got things wrong, just like we all do. It was through her ordinariness that they could see Jesus in her.

And that brings us to Andrew and Philip. Andrew and Philip were from Bethsaida, the same town as Peter. Philip's name is Greek. He might have spoken Greek, and could well have been known to the Greek pilgrims in Jerusalem.

Whatever it was, there was something in Philip and Andrew which made the Greeks feel they could approach them and ask that simple and yet crucial question 'sir, we would see Jesus'. We don't know what it was that made them approachable, but I wonder whether they managed to exude ordinariness. Like the vicar of Dibley helped me to imagine I might be a suitable candidate for training for ordination because she was ordinary, so Philip and Andrew were accessible because the Greeks saw something in them which was like them.



In October, Chris and I were at the Greater Churches Network gathering. One of the things which we discussed there was the role of church buildings in general and greater churches in particular in leading people to Christ. These buildings speak to their communities of the God who created them, redeemed them, and sustains them, and they also have something about them which hints of ordinariness, accessibility and the influence of the community of which they are a part. We visited Romsey Abbey as part of the tour and around its huge impressive pillars were tied, with string, some pictures and prayers written in coloured crayons by the local primary school children. In the corner of its rather impressive transept was quite an untidy Sunday School corner. This building spoke of the transcendence and glory of God, and also the ordinariness of day to day life. Christ, born as a baby in a stable in Bethlehem, heaven in ordinary.

The Greeks saw in Philip and Andrew people they could talk to, and so Philip and Andrew were able to lead them to Jesus. And so it is with us. It is often in our ordinariness and imperfections that we lead others to Christ. Often Jesus is visible through the things that don't quite go according to plan, the reminders that we are all human, fallible, and equal before Christ. So that coming closer to Christ isn't about moving further away from the world, but about being fully in the world so that others might know of his love for themselves.

I want to end with a story about my daughter, Freya. Three years ago, when Freya was 3, I started a new role as vicar of a small village in Northumberland. There were no children in this village church, and our arrival with three children aged 3, 5, and 7, was a bit of a shock. A few weeks after we had arrived, another family joined the church with their three year old. At the door, after the service the mother, whose name was Sarah said 'thank you for the service. We were worried that our daughter Mary would be noisy in the service, but your daughter was so much worse, we felt immediately at home'.

It has not been my plan to make Sarah and her family feel at home in church by having a particularly loud daughter, but that was what happened, and Sarah, Mary, and Mark worship with us still.

The Greeks came to Andrew and Philip and said 'sir, we would see Jesus'. And people come to us too, to our churches, and to us as individuals asking that question in all sorts of different ways. May God use us, in our strengths and in our weaknesses to speak the good news of the gospel to all with ears to hear.

Amen