

Fireside Conversations in the Vicarage:

*The scene is an ordinary room that might be found in any vicarage or manse where informal meetings are held from time to time. There are 3 people sat around, waiting for something to happen. They are not anxious as all are engaged in their own preparation. **ORGANISER** is busy arranging books and magazines and making ready the notepad and pencils. Perhaps ordering the latter in sizes or colours of the rainbow is going a bit to far but you get that sort of impression. **THOUGHTFUL** is examining something specific. Perhaps it is an item on the mantelpiece, or an unusual picture or framed certificate. The impression you get from this action is that the person is weighing a number of possibilities or uses that the item in question could be used for. **PRACTICAL** is reading. They don't have a pile of books, only one. If the title could be seen it is something "New Ideas for Worship" or "Fresh Expressions for a Material Age". **PRACTICAL** finishes the reading and closes the book to signify the start of the action.*

PRACTICAL: (Thoughtfully reflective) Hmm.

ORGANISER: Well, what do you think? Should we use the idea?

PRACTICAL: Well, it does seem to hold together. And it does offer a complete plan for a service. But do you think it's really "us"? It seems a bit too traditional and following the expected formulae.

ORGANISER: That's what people expect. And it will save us a lot of time.

PRACTICAL: (Returning the book to Organiser) I'm still not sure.

THOUGHTFUL: Why don't we just give an hour or so and see what we can come up with together? We can always come back to it if we can't think of anything for ourselves.

ORGANISER: Well, it's the best idea I've been able to come up out of all this lot!

PRACTICAL: Let's see what we all can come up with, shall we?

THOUGHTFUL: When two or more are gathered together ...

*PRACTICAL is obviously exasperated by this – all that time put in before the meeting set aside. Before he can reply **BRIDGE** (**BUILDER** = Priest) enters with a tray of drinks and biscuits.*

BRIDGE: Here we go. Whose was the coffee?

THOUGHTFUL: Mine.

ORGANISER: Tea with three sugars.

BRIDGE: (Handing out the other drinks – to PRACTICAL): I only put one in as you said! (To all): Help yourselves to biscuits. I'm sorry there's no cake, but Mary's away at our daughter's helping with the new baby. I've ordered some pizza later and I'd be

grateful if you could all stay for supper. I'm not keen on eating on my own.

THOUGHTFUL: Who is?

ORGANISER reaches for a chocolate biscuit which is placed in the saucer of the drink. The hand goes out to get a second but is stopped by a look from PRACTICAL. There is obvious tension between them but tempered with affection or concern.

BRIDGE: Before we start I'd like to share something that happened to me today. You all know that we're trying to turn the front of the church into a coffee bar? *(General agreement)* Well, I went to see Hannah Jonhson today – just to see how she was getting on.

PRACTICAL: I was there a couple of days ago and her hip seems to be giving her less pain now and she's on the mend.

BRIDGE: Yes, that's right. She hopes to make it back to church in a couple of weeks if we can organise a lift for her.

ORGANISER: I'll sort that out.

BRIDGE: Thank you. Well, I was telling her how we were going with the alterations and mentioned that we were still desperate for money for some essential equipment. She asked me for more details and I said the next big purchase was going to be a wall kettle to provide all the hot water we were going to need. She looked at me and said "If it's the right thing to do, the money will come. The Lord will provide." And do you know what? When I got back here, an envelope was sitting on the door mat. When I opened it there was just enough money to pay for the wall kettle!

PRACTICAL: Do you know who sent it?

BRIDGE: No. There was not not, nothing.

ORGANISER: Just goes to show that we've got some people at church who are prepared to back you with their hard earned cash.

THOUGHTFUL: Perhaps you'd better start talking about needing a commercial deep freezer now!

BRIDGE: Maybe you're right – both of you, but I think there's a deeper meaning and maybe it's got something to do with our meeting this evening. Perhaps we should just take a few moments to reflect on that. .. *(There is a moment of silence why they do just that)* .. Right. Where are we?

ORGANISER: Two Sunday's time. Morning service. The Transfiguration.

BRIDGE: That's right. What ideas have we got so far?

ORGANISER: Well, this is the moment when those disciples closest to Jesus have first hand experience of his divinity. Seeing him on that mountain top means they recognise his place in God's plan. The disciples also felt closer to Jesus and so to God through the experience - it was a life changing moment for them. And, if we take that as our starting point, the service should be about helping people to discover Jesus's divinity for themselves so that they can feel closer to God and perhaps have a life changing moment as well. Now, I found this service plan here (*offers the book from earlier*) and I think it fits the bill.

BRIDGE: Have you all seen this? What do you think?

PRACTICAL: I think it works as a service but I wondered if it's not too generic. I'm not sure that it fits what's going on at our church now.

THOUGHTFUL: I agree it works but I'm not sure it's what we should be highlighting.

ORGANISER: (*There is obvious tension between these two as well, but more fundamental*): That's just typical of you!

BRIDGE: Go on. What do you mean.

THOUGHTFUL: I think it's missing the point.

ORGANISER: What can be more important than recognising the divinity of Jesus?

THOUGHTFUL: I've been reflecting on what he actually said.

ORGANISER: Why?

THOUGHTFUL: Because, in the final analysis, that's all we've got to go on.

PRACTICAL: And those words were so powerful, weren't they? "Take up your bed and walk". "Wake up little girl". "Lazarus come forth".

BRIDGE: And not just those miracle working words. Remember the woman taken in adultery? "If none of these has condemned you, why should I? Go and sin no more". We can all take some sort of comfort from that.

THOUGHTFUL: Or what he said to the thief on the cross - "This day you will be with me in paradise".

ORGANISER: That's all very well but all the commentaries and resource material I've got tells me the Transfiguration is simply about that – the transformation of Jesus from the ordinary to the divine.

BRIDGE: That's true. So, what are you focussing on?

THOUGHTFUL: As I said, the words of Jesus. *(There is a general reaching for Bibles.)* As you see, what the disciples wanted to do is the same reaction that we would probably have in those circumstances. They wanted to build shelters so that they could worship him – and the other two. But Jesus says “No, keep it a secret.”

ORGANISER: That's because it wasn't his time yet. He wanted them to keep his true nature a secret until it was the right time.

BRIDGE: That's certainly the interpretation I was given when I was at college during my training.

PRACTICAL: What do you think?

THOUGHTFUL: Well, I wondered if it was the only time he said things like this to people.

ORGANISER: And what did you find?

THOUGHTFUL: Well, I found lots of examples of him telling people to keep his nature secret – like the time he healed the ten lepers and only one came back to say “thank you”. He simply told them to show themselves to the priest so they could be welcomed back into society as having been healed.

PRACTICAL: And the man by the pool. He was told to keep it secret and he only went on to give him up when he got into trouble for “working on the Sabbath”.

BRIDGE: Yes, it was a feature of his ministry.

ORGANISER: But wasn't that because as I've said before, “his time had not yet come”?

THOUGHTFUL: Let's leave that aside for now. I will come back to it.

BRIDGE: What did you do then?

THOUGHTFUL: Well, I then looked at what he actually did say – or, more correctly, what he told us to do.

ORGANISER: We all know about that – go to the ends of the earth, heal the sick, baptise them and teach them to follow everything I have commanded you.

THOUGHTFUL: If that's the case, that everyone knows that is what we should be doing, why are we here planning this service?

PRACTICAL: Well, we have to look after people – nurture the flock if you like.

BRIDGE: And I'd be out of a job if we didn't have services!

ORGANISER: You wouldn't be the only one!

BRIDGE: O.K but what next?

THOUGHTFUL: Do you remember that vision of judgement – the separating of the sheep and the goats?

ORGANISER: When I was hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison and the rest.

BRIDGE: Matthew 25.

PRACTICAL: Go on.

THOUGHTFUL: Well, then I noticed what wasn't on the list.

(Once more there is a searching of Bibles)

PRACTICAL: No. I can't see it.

THOUGHTFUL: To me the passage is saying that actions always speak louder than words. By providing that list in his teaching, he was – and is – calling us to action.

PRACTICAL: That's what he says over and over again. There's the instructions to the rich young man.

BRIDGE: Or to those who wanted to go back and bury their relative. His instructions were always clear – and often the same.

ORGANISER: "Follow me". But what does that say to us?

PRACTICAL: What would Jesus do?

THOUGHTFUL: I asked myself another question. What did Jesus do?

ORGANISER: We know all that from what's written in the Gospels.

THOUGHTFUL: But sometimes we overlook the obvious. What do you think he did?

ORGANISER: Well, he went around preaching and teaching. He healed the sick, cast out demons and raised the dead on a couple of occasions. There's a few times where it's recorded that he actually went into the Temple and some synagogues so I suppose that means he worshipped God in the traditional way.

BRIDGE: I think if you read those last passages carefully you'll find his actions stirred up trouble for the regulars. As a boy he confounded the scholars, he angered his neighbours and we must never forget his anger at seeing what to him was a house of prayer turned into a den of thieves.

PRACTICAL: Bang goes Sunday's cake sale then! But he also showed his mastery over the natural world by calming the storm and cursing the fig tree. He was concerned about all the people he came into contact with – even when all they did was to reach out and touch the hem of his cloak. And he made sure that those who had come to hear him and brought no food were fed.

THOUGHTFUL: Now you're getting the idea.

ORGANISER: You mean we should give the cakes away next Sunday and not sell them to help raise money for the coffee bar?

THOUGHTFUL: No, not necessarily – but perhaps we'll come back to that. I'm talking about the times that food played an important part in Jesus's ministry.

PRACTICAL: Well, there's the Mary and Martha story – and didn't he have a meal with tax collectors and other unsavory people at Matthew's house after he had called him to be a disciple?

BRIDGE: Yes. And the man who was lowered through the roof by his friends. That meeting was taking place in a private house so under the Jewish rules of hospitality there would have been food for the visitors.

ORGANISER: And, right at the end, there was the Last Supper.

THOUGHTFUL: But that wasn't the end, was it?

ORGANISER: What do you mean?

THOUGHTFUL: Well, he appeared to his disciples in the Upper room when Thomas wasn't there and again when he was. And he was waiting on the shore after Peter had been fishing all night without catching anything. He'd even cooked breakfast for them.

BRIDGE: The man whose hands threw the stars across the universe at the time of creation inviting his friends to come and have breakfast with him.

ORGAINSER: But we do breakfast after Easter morning early communion each year. Surely you can't be suggesting we have breakfast every week?

PRACTICAL: The Emmaus road!

ORGANISER: Sorry? I don't get it.

PRACTICAL: Don't you see. The Risen Lord met those two people on the Emmaus road and even after walking and talking with them all day they only recognised him when he persuaded him to stop and eat with them!

BRIDGE: He was recognised in the breaking of the bread.

THOUGHTFUL: That's the journey I went on. And then I arrived at Acts 2.

BRIDGE: The followers of Jesus meeting together in one another's homes, sharing the wonder of what God was doing in the world.

THOUGHTFUL: Precisely. And again I'm certain that food and sharing food would be at the heart of those gatherings. There wouldn't be any organised worship or formal service – because those sort of things hadn't been thought about yet. They were just full of the joy and wonder of knowing Jesus as their friend and their Lord.

BRIDGE: And daily more were added to their number.

ORGANISER: You're not seriously suggesting that instead of a service that we simply come together and eat are you?

THOUGHTFUL: Why not?

PRACTICAL: We've already got the cakes organised and it wouldn't take much more to get plates of sandwiches arranged.

THOUGHTFUL: We could even order them from the supermarket – I'll pay.

ORGANISER: But ... but ..

BRIDGE: What's the matter? Do you have a problem with the suggestion?

ORGANISER: Well, I like food as much as the next man, but is that what you really think we should be doing on a Sunday morning? I mean, won't people be expecting a service with hymns, prayers and a sermon? Isn't that what it should all be about?

PRACTICAL: Sometimes it's good for people to experience the unexpected.

BRIDGE: Go on.

PRACTICAL: Well, think of some of things Jesus did. The woman at the well never expected anyone to talk to her – or to offer her living water so that she wouldn't thirst again. Mary and Martha never thought that Jesus could make any difference to their brother once he had been laid in the tomb for three days. And the woman taken in adultery only expected to feel the stones that would kill her and not the kind and loving hands that helped to her feet when all her accusers had gone away.

THOUGHTFUL: The whole of his ministry was unexpected. The people expected a king who would lead them into battle over their oppressors. Instead of encouraging war this Messiah preached and practised peace. They couldn't cope with that.

BRIDGE: And even when those who opposed him thought they'd won by having him nailed,

broken and bloodied, on that cross to die, he did the unexpected thing. Unexpected even by those who were the closest to him. Despite having told them time and time again what was going to happen they were still surprised when it did.

ORGANISER: O.K. I get the idea. It's good to do the unexpected. But what should we plan about what's going to actually happen during the hour we're together?

THOUGHTFUL: First of all I don't see why it should be an hour. Let it just happen. Let it just take the time that it takes. And as for planning for what's going to happen, I say we don't. We have a God of surprises – let him surprise us.

ORGANISER: You mean, just sit people at tables, give them sandwiches, cakes and drinks and see what happen?

THOUGHTFUL: Sounds good to me.

ORGANISER: Sounds scary to me.

PRACTICAL: Sounds exciting to me!

THOUGHTFUL: When did you last look forward to a Sunday morning a little scared or even a little excited? It just seems right to me.

PRACTICAL: I suppose people will just talk to one another.

BRIDGE: They do enough of that after most services. I've often wondered if two hymns, a few prayers and a quick chat about the Bible reading would be the better approach. Get my point over sooner so as to give people more time for the real reason they come to church. To share fellowship with one another.

THOUGHTFUL: Do you remember the first thing you talked about this evening? Hannah Johnson and the amazing appearance of an envelope full of money? Well, that's the sort of story I'm sure will come out every week if we just give the people time to talk. And they won't be able to get away with "I'm alright" when asked how they are if there is no time pressure. They can sit with their friends, over food, and really share what's going on in their lives.

BRIDGE: Sharing the wonder of what the risen Lord is doing in their lives today.

THOUGHTFUL: No offence, but that's what those who don't know what we know want to hear about. They're not concerned about whether five loaves and two fishes were miraculously transformed to feed all those people or whether the action of one small boy triggered their natural generosity. They're not worried about the symbolism of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on a donkey. They want to know – need to know – how God can help them in their lives today. And the best way for them to hear about it is to hear about how he is helping others sat right next to them.

PRACTICAL: You know Stella Wilson who comes to the Wednesday afternoon group? She's getting more and more confused these days. So when I went to pick up last week she was in a right state. She couldn't find the shoes she wanted to wear and was not prepared to consider any of the 15 or so others pairs she'd got. Well, we searched high and low but I couldn't find them either. So what does Stella say? "We'll pray about them". I didn't know what to say but she looks at me the way she does and adds "God cares about the little things as well as the big things". Well, we bow our heads and Stella prays "Oh Lord, please help me find the shoes I'm looking for". Immediately there's this knock at the door and there's her next door neighbour with her shoes in his hand. "Stella," he says, "Joan's managed to mend the strap for you." Answered prayer!

BRIDGE: God cares about the little things as well as the big things.

THOUGHTFUL: But no-one is going to know about that – even if they do go to church every week – unless we make proper space for them to share these sorts of accounts. To tell one another how Jesus is living in our world and our lives today. And the more we share those stories, the more people will see how Jesus is coming into his own as we, his friends, continue to build up his Kingdom in our our lives today.

BRIDGE: Right. I think we give it a go.

ORGANISER: But there's a problem.

BRIDGE: What's that?

ORGAINSER: It's meant to be a communion service. We need to work out how to fit that in. Do we have it at the beginning, or the end, or perhaps after the sandwiches but before the cake?

BRIDGE: I guess that's down to me.

THOUGHTFUL: Yes, it is. But do we have to "plan" when it's going to happen. Why not make the necessary arrangements and just let it fit in when it feels right?

BRIDGE: I think I can live with that.

PRACTICAL: Will that feel special enough for everyone, letting it just happen?

THOUGHTFUL: Does it need to feel special? Look at the accounts of that original Last Supper. Jesus was eating with his friends for what was and is a special time in the life of the Jewish people. It was something that they had make plans for. It was, at its heart, the celebration of the salvation of their people through the action of a god who loves them.

PRACTICAL: Then he made it something new. Take this bread, this is my body. Take this wine this

is my blood . Do this in remembrance of me.

THOUGHTFUL: Yes, he put his own stamp on it – but once again, we're forgetting what he is recorded as actually saying: “Whenever you eat and drink, do this in remembrance of me.” Not only on a Sunday morning or some other special, set apart, time at the heart of hymns, prayers and teaching. Not only when there's someone whose been set apart to preside – do the magic bit if you like. No offence.

BRIDGE: None taken.

THOUGHTFUL: Every time you come together with others to simply eat or drink, do this – and I'm beginning to think it's the whole sharing of a meal rather than just the special bread and wine – in remembrance of me. Share the time together because I love you and you love me. I feel that's what was going on in those early gatherings of the followers of Jesus where they ate together. I mean, they didn't have an order of service because it hadn't been invented yet! And daily more were added to their number.

ORGANISER: I'm beginning to feel you've got something here.

PRACTICAL: If it works we can do it every week!

ORGANISER: Now, wait a minute, not that fast ...

THOUGHTFUL: And if it doesn't work, we can always go back to what's not working now.

BRIDGE: When was the last time we had someone brand new come into our church. You know someone who discovered Jesus for themselves because of we had shared with them?

There is a pause as each of them tries to recall when – or maybe even if – that happened. The pause is broken by a doorbell.

BRIDGE: That'll be the pizza.

BRIDGE exits.

PRACTICAL: Saved by the bell!

BRIDGE returns with take away pizza and soft drinks.

THOUGHTFUL: I was looking at this earlier.

ORGANISER: What is it?

BRIDGE: It's a photo of Mary and I on our trip to New York last summer. It was taken on Liberty Island – that's the Statue in the background.

THOUGHTFUL: Do you remember what's carved on it?

PRACTICAL: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

THOUGHTFUL: I've always thought that we should be saying that at every opportunity we get.

PRACTICAL: And the first thing we all do when people come to visit is to make them a cup of tea.

ORGANISER: And, if they stay for any length of time, we give them something to eat.

BRIDGE: Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

There is a pause while they all reflect on this.

BRIDGE: Well, if there's nothing else – no hymns to choose, prayer to assign or even a sermon to write we may as well just eat.

There is a general taking of pizza and soft drinks.

BRIDGE: Whenever you eat and drink

THOUGHTFUL: Do this

ORGAINSER: In remembrance of me.

PRACTICAL: Amen.