

Last Sunday we had a Pastoral letter from Bishop Patrick, in which he outlined for us his vision to reinvigorate the diocese over the next 5 years. The themes that he expounded were, as he rightly said, not new: they are the themes of the Apostolic age: Encounter, Discipleship and Mission. What this means and what it entails for us has been laid in a comprehensive document entitled: *'Go, Make Disciples': A New Vision for Renewal and Mission'*

This is available on the Diocesan website, and a shorter version available to download on the Parish website; just go the Parish home-page and click on the image which will take you to the right area. Paper copies of this will be available from next Sunday. On Monday past, the Bishop met with groups from the Loughborough and Leister Deaneries to lay out his plan personally, and he will meet with the rest of his Diocese over the next few weeks. What this means for us will be come clearer over the next few months, as I re-read the documents and consult with the Parish Pastoral Council and others.

But there are some things we should be doing now. 'Encounter' is the logical place to begin.

'Encounter' in this sense means to encounter God, and more explicitly Jesus Christ. Encounter means to 'come across', 'to meet face to face', it means to experience. Unless we encounter Christ we cannot be Disciples – to follow Him – and we cannot obey our calling to Mission – which is to direct the gaze of others to Him. First we must know Him.

The Bishop makes a lot of having a 'Personal relationship with Jesus' as being the experience of Encounter. I will admit – and it is my problem not yours – that I do not get on easily with that term as it has been, in my mind, corrupted by Evangelical Christians who like to shout about their 'Personal relationship with Jesus' and then get too close to you and ask *'Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?'* This seems to me to be inquisitorial, boastful and presumptuous, all at the same time. Yes, I do know Jesus, otherwise I do would not be in the place he calls me to when I would often rather be a million miles away. But I know I am not his buddy, but his servant. Maybe at the end of this 5 years I will have a different perspective, but I wanted to explain to you up front why I steer away from some words, but still I do not think I am very far from the Bishop's intentions.

How do we encounter God? For many of us it has been accidental or against our will. We have butted up against something which will not go away: a thought, and image, a person, a persistent though vague sense that someone is seeking you and asking for a response from you. Reluctantly you find your way wandering into a church. It is a different world. How do you speak about that which you are not at all clear about? You are drawn into silence. Maybe, if you needed a word for it, you would call it prayer.

What is prayer? For the moment let's just call it the trajectory of being. That seems vague enough to mean just about anything, doesn't it? Well, it does not mean anything, it does mean everything of value in your relationship with God. So, once you get over the shock of actually being

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in a church, what do you do? You look inside yourself, and you look around.

There is someone crossing themselves as they come through the door. Not a hasty chest scratch, but a purposeful prolonged crossing, from shoulder to shoulder, from forehead to stomach. There is someone sitting quietly, their eyes shut, a string of beads clutched in their hands, patiently uttering inaudible words. Read aloud is Jesus on the mountain, drawing his disciples around them as he expounds about the Beatitudes, and you are there to. Not just listening, but feeling His words enter your heart and knowing that they are for you, a map for your life. There is someone humbly kneeling to receive the Eucharist on their tongue transported with joy. There is someone lighting a candle and showing a child how to do the same, pausing for a long while afterwards before a plaster saint. In a corner is someone weeping, in another a mother trying to keep a baby peaceful during a snatched moment of calm and her own thoughts. In a moment there will be a stir of opening hymnals, and all the gathered will join in a hymn, some haltingly, some strident and confident.

This is prayer, the call of your whole being out to the unseen, and then bit by bit, sensing that you receiving a response, that you are being tuned in to hear another voice. Listen. Here is the domain of Encounter.