

I want to tell you a story.

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, there was a monastery in a wood, some distance from a small village, a long way from anywhere else. The monastery had been there for a very long time - indeed, some people said that the village was there because of the monastery - although some argued that the village had come first, and then the monastery. Either way, there were very good relationships between the two. The villagers came to hear Mass, to celebrate weddings and baptisms; they asked the Brothers to bury their dead and to pray for their sick. Some of their young men joined the monastery as Brothers. But gradually the relationship changed - the villagers didn't feel welcome, and the Brothers became very insular. It came to the point where they were reduced to seven - Father Abbot and six elderly brothers. 'We are dying on our feet', said Father Abbot. 'Soon you will bury me, there will be no priest, no Mass, no reason for us being here - and who will care for the last one?' So he decided he would go and ask God what he should do - but not in the chapel, in the forest - 'I will go and ask the Lord what we

should do' he announced - and put on his old, thin cloak over his habit, and set off to the wood above. After about two hours of slow prayerful walking, he noticed a fire burning in a clearing. Beside the fire sat a very old man with a youthful twinkle in his eye. 'May I join you?' inquired the Abbot, and sat down. There was a long silence, but eventually the Abbot said 'We are dying on our feet. The villagers don't come any more; we have no new Brothers; we are so old we can hardly grow our own food or look after each other - and we bicker - we constantly bicker. What are we to do?' The old man said - 'The one whom you sought when you entered the monastery stands amongst you'. The Abbot was taken aback - 'I beg your pardon?' - 'The one whom you sought when you entered the monastery stands amongst you'. And then the old man struggled to his feet, picked up his walking stick and left. Abbot sat there for a long time - what did it mean? - 'The one whom you sought when you entered the monastery stands amongst you'. When he realised that the fire had burnt out and it was beginning to get dark, he set off home. After Compline, contrary to everything they ever did, the Brothers gathered in the Common Room, to hear what Father Abbot had to say - 'The one whom you sought when you entered the monastery stands

amongst you'. 'But that means' they all said, 'that one of us is The Lord'. But which one? None of them slept that night. The following day, when Br Peter came in from working in the garden, and made muddy footprints down the cloister, instead of shouting at him for being so uncaring, Br Phillip said 'No bother; I'll get the mop'. Br Peter apologised. You wouldn't want to shout at the Lord, would you? When Br Amos went to the library to get a book and put things back in the wrong place, Br Simon, the librarian, didn't moan about his books being out of order, he offered to help. When Father Abbot let go of a door which swung into the face of Br Francis and nearly broke his nose, there was apology and forgiveness, you wouldn't want to shut a door in the face of the Lord, would you?. And when Br Gregory burnt the dinner, spoiling all the food they had in the kitchen, Br Peter said 'don't worry, I can go back to the garden and did up some potatoes and carrots. It won't take me long'. The bickering stopped - who would want to bicker with The Lord? The brothers began to walk to the village again to see if everyone was alright and to invite the people to Mass - in the presence of The Lord (although they didn't mention that).

When Easter arrived, the villagers decided to go to the monastery and to take gifts, for the first time in years. There was singing and dancing, and someone said 'Would you like me to come up occasionally and help in the garden?' Someone else suggested that she could come and polish the chapel brass now and again - one young person wanted to prepare to receive communion for the first time. New life entered the monastery and the village.

Father Abbot pondered - what had happened? 'The one whom you sought when you entered the monastery stands amongst you'. He thought "We never did work out which one of us it was, but it doesn't seem to matter - 'The one whom we sought when we entered the monastery stands amongst us'."

The people who came out to see John - not John the Baptist, as it says in Matthew's Gospel, not John the Baptizer as Mark tells us, not John the son of Zechariah, as we read in Luke, but John the Witness, as John the evangelist calls him - those who came to listen to John the Witness would not have long to wait to know who it was who stood amongst them - even though Jesus left the Jordan for the wilderness, and then headed north to Galilee to begin his ministry of proclamation and healing. But what John the

Witness declared two thousand years ago still hold true today. Jesus, unknown to us, stands amongst us today, and with Isaiah, calls us to proclaim liberty to captives, good news for the oppressed, comfort for those who mourn: with Paul, he calls us to rejoice, to pray, to give thanks, to hold fast to what is good - to witness to the love of God in what we say and what we do. Some people have never heard of Jesus - could you be John the Witness for them? Some people have heard, but have no idea what it really means - could you be John the witness for them? We are not the Light; we are called to bear witness to the Light, links in a chain, a helping hand on a journey towards God. The call to us today is to be witnesses for God - to declare that the coming of Jesus is indeed GOOD NEWS.