How do you recognize someone? Isn’t that obvious? We look at their face. To a lesser extent, we hear their voice. Perhaps smell might just play a part? But we are generally pretty confident about recognizing someone we know well, especially if it is only a few days ago since we saw them. Indeed, we have a remarkable ability to recognize people when it is many years since we saw them, and they have aged a lot. We are also probably fairly sure about judging people we don’t know by appearance. If someone just wanders into church we form a judgement pretty quickly on whether they may be a prospective member of the congregation, just a visitor looking at the church or someone looking for a place to sleep off a session at the BA.

But how often are we right in these judgements? We will probably admit that we are sometimes wrong about the latter, about judging what type of person someone is from their appearance. But we will be pretty confident that we do recognize friends from their appearance, even over a space of years.

No doubt the disciples thought the same. But we hear a remarkable story in today’s gospel reading. Two of them were walking on the road to Emmaus and they were discussing the puzzling fact of the empty tomb. The gospel story says “Jesus himself came up and walked along with them, but something kept them from seeing who it was.” This is truly strange. The man they were discussing joins them and they do not recognize him! Some might say they were too preoccupied with their concerns But surely that won’t wash, when he was man they knew so well. Surely his build and voice would have told them who he was? One commentary suggested that they were supernaturally prevented from recognizing him and perhaps that does fit with the wording of the passage which says **something** prevented them from seeing who it was. Perhaps that something was divine intervention, but that seems rather contrived.

Of course, this is not an isolated event but has similar characteristics to the other post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. That is, he was not recognized until some particular physical action occurred. When they were fishing and Jesus appeared on the shore they did not recognize him until he told them to let their net down on the other side of the boat and they made a big catch. When he appeared in the closed room they thought he was a spirit, understandably perhaps, until he showed them his wounds.

All very surprising considering how well they knew him and had seen him only days earlier. Clearly there was something very different about Jesus after his resurrection. Now I don’t intend to explore the possible reasons for this failure to recognize Jesus, although it is all very interesting for what resurrection means. I just want to draw a simple conclusion: that we may know someone very well but can fail to recognize them in very different circumstances, in spiritual circumstances. We tend to typecast those we know well not just by their appearance but by their roles. We expect to see people in a certain context and role, and we might find it difficult to “see” and by that I mean visualise, them in a different role.

Do we fail to see people in different roles in our church and in our life? Perhaps we fail to recognize some important work that someone we know is doing outside our normal relationship with them. We see them at services but, for example, are they also visiting the sick or encouraging people who are wavering in their faith? Even more important, are people we know capable of doing these things but are lacking that encouragement from us that we can see them in that role. We think we know people, but we may be arresting their development by only seeing them in the way we know and are familiar with, or perhaps in a role that makes us comfortable with them. So let’s look at our friends through different eyes and see what else they could do.

Looking at friends in a new way is one thing. But re-appraising our enemies is something very different. How can we be expected to find a welcome for those who want to hurt us and the church? This is a very real issue now, as the church seems to have so few friends. But do we have enemies? Is it not just that most people are indifferent? They couldn’t care less? These days’ people don’t want to burn the church down and kill us, well only kill us with their indifference anyway. But perhaps it would be better if they really did want to kill us, as then we would to take them seriously, because they took us seriously? As it is, most people ignore us and we ignore them. We certainly don’t think that they might become our greatest supporters do we?

In the early days of the Christian church indifference was not an option. You were either a Christian or you were very much anti-Christian. Look at Saul of Tarsus. In the book of Acts we can read how Saul, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked if he might arrest any Christians he found at Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem. So there is absolutely no doubt what an enemy he was. The first Christians must have regarded him much as many people today thought of Osama bin Laden, a bitter ideological enemy of our faith.

But what do we find happens to Saul? Jesus appears to him in a vision on the road to Damascus, a famous scene. Not quite so well known perhaps is that God then asks one of the disciples at Damascus, Ananias, to go and lay his hands on Saul, to heal him that he might regain his sight and bless him so that he can receive the Holy Spirit. I am sure you can understand that Ananias was horrified. “Lord”, he says, “I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem and now he has authority to arrest all those who believe in you.” Saul was regarded with hatred and loathing by the Christians, he had, after all, allowed Stephen to be stoned to death for his faith. God’s response is very different. “Go”, he says to Ananias, “for he is a chosen instrument of mine.” And as we know, Paul, as Saul then became, was a mighty and compelling instrument for spreading Christianity throughout the Middle East.

There is a very important lesson here. That lesson is not just that God can achieve what we cannot imagine; conversion of someone like Saul to Paul. The lesson is also that, by God’s grace, what may seem to us our worst enemy may become our greatest supporter. People who can oppose powerfully can also advocate powerfully. And God has the power to achieve that, even though it seems impossible to us.

When we look at recent history, I can think of two examples of this. Probably most of you know of CS Lewis, author of the Narnia stories and a very powerful advocate of Christianity. His books must have helped many thousands to come to and understand faith in God. But he was determined atheist until his early twenties, when he finally found the pressure God was putting on his mind irresistible. The other example is the man rebutting all Dawkins arguments against Christianity. He is another Oxford professor, Alister McGrath. His arguments are so powerful because he himself was an atheist for much of his early life. So these once staunch atheists, Lewis and McGrath have become the greatest defenders of Christianity in their day. Modern Pauls. Which goes to show just what God can do.

God can recognize when people are ready to accept him. But are we more like the disciples on that Emmaus road? Someone we meet on the road of our life may be ready to make that move from doubt to belief; we just do not recognize that. Like the disciples, we are so self absorbed by our concerns, may be concerns about the church, that we just cannot see the importance of that person we have just met, how they might be the answer to our prayers, how they may have Christ in them. Our recognition of that Christ in them will make all the difference in the world to them, and probably to us. Let us then pray for discernment to recognize Christ in other people we meet, even if they are not “one of us,” even if they do not come to church, even if they are not even Christians.