Surely one of the great wonders of human life must be the gift of speech. For most of us the ability to form and utter words is an everyday fact that we take it for granted – until, that is, it is taken away from us. When a teacher loses her voice or a stroke victim can no longer form intelligible words, suddenly we discover again what a wonderful gift the spoken word is.

I suppose there are few people who are immune to the charms of babies, but I did once know someone who willingly admitted to finding infants boring. ‘They’re so tedious’, she said, ‘you can’t converse with them, they just lie there and gurgle or wail’. On one level she was right – you can’t hold any kind of normal conversation – but every parent knows how vital it is to talk to babies. Conversing with a baby may appear to be a bit of a one-way process, all give and no take; it may not always be very rewarding, but it is essential. The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II is said to have conducted an experiment to try to discover what the language natural to human beings was. A child was isolated at birth and deprived of all verbal communication to see what language would come to it naturally. Unsurprisingly the child didn’t suddenly start speaking. The only language known to it was silence, so silent it remained. Language doesn’t appear in us spontaneously: it is only because we have been spoken to that we can speak, only because we have been addressed that we can reply. We need to be coaxed and loved into speech.

Being coaxed into speech is exactly what today’s gospel is about. The disciples on the road to Emmaus are like speechless infants who have not yet learned the new language of the resurrection. They talk – indeed, reading between the lines of the story, I guess that they talk at some length – sharing their sense of loss and pain with the friendly stranger on the road. But in the new light of the resurrection their speech is as meaningless as the indecipherable babble of a young child. They don’t recognise Jesus, because they cannot
recognise him. The resurrection of Christ is an event so extraordinary, so much outside the framework of what they know, that they cannot take it on board. Their language and their perception simply fall short.

They are not alone: we latter day disciples find ourselves in the same position. Each year we domesticate Easter with our images of eggs and spring and flowers. But Easter is not about the passing of the seasons, the annual cycle of death and re-birth, marvellous though that is. Easter is about an event that can only be described as a new creation. The Easter stories in the gospels re-write the first chapters of Genesis. They tell the story of God’s making anew. The resurrection of God’s only-begotten Son is also the begetting of a new order that transforms the world. In Saint Paul’s words, ‘if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. The old has passed away, and behold the new has come’. To remind us of this for centuries the Church forbade all paintings of the resurrection – all that could be depicted was the empty tomb. To paint the actual event of the resurrection, it was felt, was to confine and domesticate an event that itself redefines all events.

When they meet the risen Jesus, the Emmaus-bound disciples are not equipped to recognise him, they can’t understand the language in which he addresses them. The man who meets them is in every sense a stranger, a man unknown to them. How could he be anything else than unknown, being risen from the dead? Rather as young babies cannot focus on the faces of the people around them, so the disciples cannot bring into focus Christ’s risen countenance. But, patiently, like a loving parent with a child, Jesus talks to them and teaches them the language they lack, teasing them away from the incoherent babble of their disillusion and loss into the new language of resurrection. As with an adult conversing with a young child, talking to these children is not without its frustrations: ‘O fools’, Jesus cries out, ‘and slow of heart’. But he persists and brings them to the point when at last their tongues are loosed and they make the marvellous confession at the root of our faith: ‘The Lord is risen indeed’.

What is it that brings about this recognition, this freeing of their tongues, this movement from noise into speech? Well at the heart of this marvellous story are these two verses: ‘And it came to pass as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished from their sight.’ Here at the crux of the story is a moment of silence. The words cease. The many words spoken first by the disciples and then by their unknown Lord and master are laid to one side, and in their place is an action: bread, taken, blessed, broken and given.
Inevitably and rightly, we see here a sacrament, a eucharistic action performed by our Lord. But in recognising a sacrament here we shouldn’t miss how truly unprecedented this eucharistic wonder is. When the disciples invite the stranger into their company, they think they’re the hosts inviting him to a meal; but as soon as they have sat down the roles are reversed and they discover that they are guests at a meal that is no longer theirs. Here at the supper at Emmaus in the breaking of the bread, they’re suddenly face to face with the new world of the resurrection. In the old familiar action of eating together, the unprecedented newness of the risen Christ is made known to them. Bread taken, blessed, broken and given, vouchsafes a foretaste of the life of the kingdom, a kingdom whose coordinates elude all our attempts to map them, a kingdom where the risen Christ is guest, host and food all at the same time.

That sacramental table spread before the disciples at Emmaus is set before us too. Under current constraints we may not eat together: at present we are not, literally, companions, those who break bread together. But sacramentally our communion is unimpaired, as we take to heart Peter’s words from our first reading: ‘For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him’.

The eucharist we share is the sacrament of the transformation – the earthquake, as Canon Harrison described it last week – that is the resurrection of our Lord. It is the sacramental language by which God converses with us, coaxing us into speech, so that we in turn may become servants and sacraments of God’s Son. And if we will let it, that conversation will become our conversion too. Conversion which is the daily bread of all followers of Christ; that frees us from the infantile inadequacy of our normal language to declare with awe the majestic mystery of our faith: ‘The Lord is risen indeed’.

In nomine…