

On the Road

Luke 24: 13-35

Some of you will know that prior to being a vicar, I had a career in social work – in particular, social work with children and families. When I was a young social worker and still working on the frontline with a caseload of children, I would often meet a young person outside of the home, whether this was their own home, or living with foster parents or other children in a care home. And when we'd meet, we'd often go for a walk. Because there's something about a walk that gets people talking. You're often much more relaxed for a start, particularly if you're out in the countryside. Walking along, looking at the ground in front of you, listening to the leaves of the trees move in the wind, the birdsong, with no expectation of eye contact or awkward silences. And I'd find that even the most reluctant talkers would start to open up about what was on their mind, what was worrying them. It was always time well spent.

Today's passage from Luke's gospel – the story of two disciples on the road to Emmaus has always been one of my absolute favourites. I don't expect you to remember, but it's the passage that I chose for my licensing service here in Cottenham almost three years ago. And it's my favourite for several reasons.

The first is because Jesus chooses to journey alongside ordinary disciples. Cleopas is only mentioned once in the Bible and that's here - in this passage from Luke. The other disciple he's walking with isn't named, but many think that it's likely to have been his wife. Like many other Jews, they'd been in Jerusalem for the weekend, for Passover and, whilst there, were probably witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion. We're told in John's gospel that there was a Mary, wife of Clopas, near the cross with Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene, so if Cleopas and Clopas were the same person as people suspect, they were close followers of Jesus and were right at the heart of what had happened on Good Friday. Having witnessed this event, it's easy to see why they were downcast or, as the Message translation says, *'long-faced, like they had lost their best friend'*. Because they had.

And now they're on their way home. They're walking along, deep in conversation, playing over and over again the events of the weekend, trying to make sense of it, particularly as earlier that day some of the women said that the tomb was empty and that they'd seen angels who'd told them that Jesus was alive. Back and forth the conversation will have gone as they tried to

process what they'd seen and heard. And it's in the course of this conversation that Jesus joins them on their walk home to Emmaus, a journey of about seven miles. Remember, in Luke's account of the resurrection, at this point Jesus hasn't appeared to any of the remaining eleven disciples, or Mary Magdalene, or any of his own family. Jesus' first appearance is to these two – followers, yes – but not those who were the very closest to him. He joins them but, for whatever reason, they are prevented from recognising him. And there follows the almost comical scene of Cleopas and his companion recounting the story of Jesus of Nazareth to – well, Jesus of Nazareth!

He asks them what they were talking about and they pour out their hearts to him, easy to do whilst walking and everything is relaxed and open. *'We'd hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel'* they said. They had their hopes up, but all their hopes were now seemingly dashed. But, what was most confusing was the report from the women that morning, that he was alive. And it's here that Jesus decides to intervene. *'How foolish you are'* he gently chides them. *'Why can't you simply believe all that the prophets said?'*

Which leads me on to the second thing I love about this story, which is that Jesus then takes the time to help them understand. He meets them where they are, and starts at the beginning, with the Books of Moses, and went on through the Prophets, pointing out everything in the Scriptures that referred to him. Later, the apostle Paul in his letter to the early church in Corinth tells us that *'Love is patient, love is kind'* and here we see those words in action right here in this story, as Jesus patiently, lovingly, explains to these two ordinary disciples why it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer; that it was God's plan and not a terrible accident.

They then draw near to the village where they were going and Jesus acts as if he's walking further. But, as was the tradition of the time, these two know of the need to be hospitable and they urge Jesus to come and stay with them for the night, after all it's getting dark and they will all be hungry. They invite him in and set about preparing the meal. When it's ready, they sit down. Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and begins to give it to them. And we're told that it was in *this* moment, open-eyed, wide-eyed, that they recognised him. And then he disappeared.

And that's the third reason I love this passage, not that he disappeared, but that Jesus was there *in the moment* with them. It was no longer about what had gone before, the whole history of Moses and the Prophets, or what would

happen in the future, but was about what was happening *then*, in that very moment. And for them, at that very moment, they were having an encounter, a very personal encounter with the living Jesus, their risen Lord. Two ordinary disciples who'd shared a journey with Jesus, with whom he'd been patient and kind, and to whom he had chosen to reveal himself, because they'd invited him in. And it's in the breaking of the bread, something we do in church most weeks as we remember him, that Jesus lets them see who has joined them for supper.

I love that Jesus chooses to journey with ordinary disciples, people just like you and me. That no-one is too high or low for him to want to know and to love. I also find it deeply reassuring that he meets them where they were and helps them to understand the story – *his* story. The story of God's plan for the world, of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and his plan for each and every one of us, that we too would know God's love for us, and would want to live his way.

If you're reading or listening to this sermon online, it may be that you don't normally come to church on a Sunday, or haven't thought too much about faith in recent years. You might be good at looking back over your life and it may be that you can see how God was at work at specific times. Maybe at one of those key life events – getting married, having children, or perhaps at a time of sadness or loss. You might also be good at looking forward, thinking about how life could be in the future. You might be someone who likes to plan ahead.

But what about *now*? It may be that extended time at home has created more space than you usually have to think about faith. What about your relationship with Jesus now? Do you allow time in your day, your week, for Jesus to come alongside you? Those quiet times maybe when you pray? Do you share your worries with him, the things that are uppermost on your mind? The things that weigh you down? If not, maybe now is the time.

Can I invite you this week to create some space - it might even be when you're out for a walk - and remember the story of those two early disciples, for whom everything seemed lost. And I encourage you to remember that Jesus is the one who wants to come alongside us, to bring comfort and hope but ultimately to transform our lives as we remember his promise to us, that promise he made to his disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel, before he returned to his Father – *'And surely I am with you always.'* May we all know the presence of Jesus in this difficult times. Amen.