

A Divine Encounter

Luke 24: 13-48

If you read them (and I'm not supposing for one minute that everyone does!), you will have noticed in the Pastoral Letters that recently I've been talking about the importance of giving ourselves time and space to reflect on our own experience of the pandemic. Over this last year, whilst we've all arguably been in the same storm, we haven't necessarily been in the same boat and our experiences may well be very different. Some of us will have relished the slower pace of life, appreciated time on our own or with those we live, and the closure of the retail, hospitality and leisure industries won't have had much impact. But for others, there will have been multiple deprivations over this last year, all of which will leave their mark on us. As we come out of the crisis that Covid-19 has caused, it can be helpful to remember and reflect on our experience, to make sense of what has happened as we look forward to the future.

This is exactly what was going on for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Talking as you walk was as helpful then as it is now, and the two are deep in conversation, talking about what they've experienced – the highs and the lows, when they are joined on the road by a 'stranger'. One of the oddest features of Luke's account is that the disciples are *leaving* Jerusalem. They've heard that Jesus was risen from the dead, the women have told them about the empty tomb, and others have been to see it too. Why, then, are they leaving Jerusalem and why are they so downcast? Devastated is probably a better word to describe how they're feeling, particularly when they tell Jesus why they're feeling this way: *'About Jesus of Nazareth. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.'* And there you have it, all of their hopes had been dashed. Jesus was the one who was going to save the people of Israel, and now he was gone.

But look at the irony with which Luke writes. Just as on the cross Jesus revealed himself to be the Saviour of the World by **not** saving himself, so here he *has* redeemed Israel - he has died and risen again. What more could they want? What this tells us, however, is that they didn't understand the *significance* of what had happened. The resurrection was something of a

mystery and they were leaving Jerusalem disappointed and sick at heart that their hopes had not been realised. Contrary to what they thought, there was nothing more that needed to happen in the world. Jesus had already accomplished it all. Instead, what they needed was to travel to a place in themselves from which they could recognise what had already happened.

One of the intriguing features of the account, however, is that the two disciples do not seem to have been in entire agreement with each other. In our Bible translation, when Jesus first met these disciples, we read that they were in the middle of a 'discussion'. The Greek though suggests something altogether less polite. The first word used in verse 14 is '*homileo*', which means converse. So far, so good. This is repeated in verse 15 but then added to the word '*suzeteo*', which is better translated as dispute than discuss. By the time Jesus asked them what they were doing in verse 17, he asked them literally 'what are these words that you are throwing against each other?' This strikes me as much more of an argument than a 'discussion', which leads on to the question of who these disciples actually were.

Who they were can be no more than a point of speculation, but it's interesting to note that one of them was named: *Cleopas*. This was short for Cleopatros and could well have been the equivalent of Clopas, a name mentioned in John's gospel. There in John, we meet not Clopas, but his wife Mary at the crucifixion. It's impossible to know for sure, but it is not beyond the realms of possibility to assume that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus are married to each other, and that Jesus intervened in a marital dispute. Brave man!

What I love about this resurrection story is that it involves two ordinary disciples, people like you and like me. They weren't part of the elite, the inner circle of twelve (now eleven), but were part of the next level – the outer core. It may be that it was Mary who was more of a follower than her husband Cleopas, as it was *she* who took the risk of being at the foot of the cross as Jesus died. Maybe *she* was more convinced by the story told by the women of the vision of angels at the empty tomb that morning. Maybe *that* was what they'd been arguing about. We'll never know. But perhaps the crucial question for this passage is this: what was it that led to these two disciples recognising Jesus as the risen Messiah?

The account suggests two things. Firstly, the words of Scripture. Jesus rebukes them in verse 25: '*How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!*' The implication is that the disciples shouldn't

have been confused at all, because they should have realised from the words of Jesus and the Scriptures they knew so well, that the Christ had to suffer and to die. How lovely that Jesus follows his rebuke with a Bible study – a Bible study on the road. He chooses to make himself known on that first Easter Day through the Word. These disciples don't have a clue what's going on until Jesus explains it from the Bible. Before they returned to Jerusalem, we read that they asked each other, '*Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?*'

Dare we ask ourselves – when was the last time *our* hearts burned within us as we read something from our Bibles?

Whilst Jesus spent the journey unpacking Scripture for the disciples, this doesn't appear to have been the factor that caused them to recognise him, but I do think it certainly paved the way. As the disciples recount the story to the eleven once they arrive back in Jerusalem, we learn from verse 35 that the moment of recognition came in the breaking of the bread. The question is how. The problem is that the blessing and breaking of bread was something that would have been done at the start of *every* Jewish meal and so would have been a normal activity. But there was clearly something that marked out this blessing and breaking from any other normal blessing and breaking. It could have been that Jesus had a strikingly characteristic way of breaking bread; or it could have been that in lifting up his hands to break the bread, the scars in them were revealed. Another possibility is that it was the fact that he broke bread at all. The person who normally blessed and broke the bread was the host of the meal. Jesus, who was thought to be unknown to the two disciples, assumed the role of host. Could *that* have been the factor that caused them to recognise him?

As soon as '*their eyes were opened*' and they saw him for who he was, he disappeared from their sight. Jesus disappeared but his Word remains. This seems to be Luke's message to us. How do we make Christ known today? Well, through the Bible might be a good place to start. It doesn't sound particularly trendy, but clearly it's God's way. It was lovely to hear through last July's 'return to church' questionnaire of members of the church family turning to their Bibles during that first lockdown, and reading through the gospels. And equally lovely that many of you engaged with the Bible study during Lent - whether that was the study of Daniel on Fridays, or Lamentations on Tuesdays – with some of you saying it was the first time you'd joined a Bible study for

years. And guess what – it was good! You enjoyed it. And hopefully it'll lead to more.

For an encounter with Christ is always a call to action, to involvement, to participation. You can't remain a passive observer. For the two disciples, meeting the risen Jesus results in a radical change of plan: they literally retrace their steps by returning to the city. Think of how significant that is. They do what they'd urged Jesus *not* to do – they take the road at night with all its dangers. But more than that. They return to the city to join the eleven – the most dangerous place you could be. But they return because now everything has changed. They know – they *really* know for themselves that Jesus is the risen Lord. Their eyes have been opened and nothing will ever be the same.

I said on Easter Day that the season of Easter ought to be a time to take things up, a time to metaphorically sow new seeds and to plant out a few cuttings. If you want to encounter the risen Jesus for yourself, and to recognise him for who he really is - whether for the first time or the one hundredth time - then we could do no better than to follow the example of Jesus, by turning to Scripture. And we have the benefit not only of the New Testament, but also through the most extraordinary of ordinary actions – the blessing, breaking and sharing of bread, as we come together to share in communion, to remind ourselves of all that Jesus was, and is, and is to come. Let's truly be an Easter people.

Amen.