

Lessons from Emmaus

Luke 24.13-35

Imagine, will you, a group of people out for an afternoon walk. They are quite a crowd, so inevitably they are not all walking together. There are lots of little groups within the party. But they are all going in the same direction, and enjoying each other's company. They are telling each other their news, and sharing what has been happening to them since they last met. The weather is not perfect - sometimes there are clouds threatening to pour rain on them; at other times the sun shines brightly. The walk produces stresses and strains for some of the walkers, as well as enjoyment. Some are very young and get tired quickly: some are quite elderly, and find going uphill quite a struggle. In fact some give up, and find their way back to where they started, or go off on their own, leaving the others completely. But there are comings as well as goings. People come and join them as they go along, and they are glad to have new conversation and people to share the walk with them. In fact they have known that there would be newcomers on the walk joining them, and have been watching out for their arrival. These people are strangers, so there is a certain amount of tension as to what they will be like.

Let me draw out five thoughts from the story of that walk to Emmaus.

The first is that Jesus meets people without them realising it. Those disciples on the road didn't recognise this man who joined them. It is a reminder to me that we encounter God more often than we realise. There is for all of us a tendency to restrict encountering God – we expect to meet him in church, or as we pray, or as we read the Bible, or do all sorts of overtly religious things. There is nothing wrong with that. But if only we realised that God is with us 24/7, and that we meet him in other people, in the beauty of nature, or of art, or of music. I am sure many of you know those words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God
But only those who see take off their shoes
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.

So let this story of the walk to Emmaus provoke us to join those who take off shoes, and leave the blackberries alone.

The second is that Jesus leaves those men to discover for themselves what the truth really is. You might imagine that faced with the response to his question about what they were discussing; he would pitch in with the whole truth. But he doesn't. He doesn't just listen – it says he goes back to the things they already knew, and talks it through with them yet again. But he doesn't corner them into seeing who is talking to them. And before he teaches, he listens. 'Education' literally means a 'leading out' – taking

people from where they are to somewhere else. For all of us, the process of grasping the truth is a gradual one. And sometimes we need to revisit what we think we already know, and discover that perhaps we didn't know it after all. There is what sometimes called the circle of competence which applies to almost everything. Think of learning to drive as an example. We start with conscious incompetence, we move to conscious competence, and then on to unconscious competence. That is fine, but the horrid truth is that we then probably move on to unconscious *incompetence*, because we think we know it all, and we don't – and so we have to go round the circle again. I believe that applies to our faith. We don't know what to believe, we work at it, and find we do – it becomes part of us – but then we have to realise that maybe we don't know it all, and need to go round again. That is what happened at the end of that story, when the men reflect on how their 'hearts burned' whilst they were listening to him. I quoted Elizabeth Barrett Browning – let me now quote T.S. Eliot

We shall never cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

So let this story of the walk to Emmaus encourage us to keep moving round that circle, and to re-learn what we already know, and make new discoveries which deepen our faith.

Thirdly, this story tells us we can't pin God down. The men - still unaware that it is Jesus, ask this man to stay with them – just generous hospitality on their part. They prepare a supper, and when Jesus breaks the bread, they suddenly grasp who has been with them. No sooner has that happened, they find that he has gone. The disciples in the upper room had the disturbing thing of Jesus suddenly appearing with them. These men have the equally disturbing thing of Jesus suddenly *disappearing* from them. What happened for them in an instant was of course what all those first disciples had to cope with as Jesus prepared to leave them at the Ascension. They had come to rely on his physical presence. But in order for the Gospel to be spread as he had asked, they had to stand on their own two feet. This is just so real, isn't it? When we are taught how to do something, we may well ask our teacher to stay with us when we do it for ourselves for the first time – to give us confidence. But that can't go on. We can't tie God down, imprison him, just so we can feel OK. Let's have another poem, this time by Sydney Carter:

Catch the bird of heaven,
Lock him in a cage of gold;
Look again tomorrow,
And he will be gone.

Lock him in religion,
Gold and frankincense and myrrh
Carry to his prison,
But he will be gone.

Bell and book and candle
Cannot hold him any more,
For the bird is flying
As he did before.

Let this story of the walk to Emmaus free us from trying to tame God. He is too wild for that.

The fourth point is that the story shows us there are particular ways in which we can know the presence of Christ. Despite the truth I was talking about just now about God being met with everywhere, he has given us ways in which we have special opportunities to meet with him. The men at Emmaus remember that as they heard his words, their hearts were moved. So as we read the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, and indeed as we read the scriptures which Jesus was quoting to them as he teaches them, there we have a particular way of meeting with him. The Bible is one of the gifts of God to enable us to know he is with us. The men at Emmaus meet him in the breaking of the bread. The Communion service above all others is a place when by God's grace we meet with our Lord. Christians have argued through the ages about just how it is that Jesus is present in bread and wine. I couldn't care less about the theories. What I know is the practice, the reality that when I hold out my hand for bread and wine, there I receive my Lord. So in the spirit of poetry, let's hear a piece of doggerel ascribed to Queen Elizabeth I.

'Twas God the Word that spake it,
He took the Bread and brake it;
And what the word did make it
That I believe, and take it.

So let the story of the walk to Emmaus renew our thankfulness for Word and Sacrament.

Lastly, you may be relieved to know, this story tells us that we can't keep all this to ourselves. The disciples were trudging to Emmaus feeling disconsolate. There was certainly no spring in their step. It was about four miles journey from Jerusalem. They were sad, miserable, downhearted and tired, physically, mentally and spiritually. But look what happened after that meal – they got up 'That same hour' it says and returned to Jerusalem, full of energy. You can see them almost running to get there and share their elation that they had met with Jesus. Every week when we meet at the altar, we also are sent off with various dismissals – 'Go in the peace of Christ, Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, Go in peace. Mend what is broken; unite what is divided; live the gospel'. The point of coming is so we can go. Our faith is not something cosy for our own benefit, but so that we can be the hands and feet and voice of Christ in the world he came to save. If we don't do that, we fail him. One of my hymns underlines what I have just been saying. The walk to Emmaus says to us - take off your shoes, keep renewing your faith, don't try to pin God down, meet with him in word and sacrament and go and live out the gospel. And may God bless us all as we do so.

When God saw the world was ready
Jesus came, God's precious Son
To live and die for our redemption
Life and hope for everyone.
Make us worthy of his favour
Make us glad for all he's done
In making new the whole creation,
Death defeated, vict'ry won.

Jesus called twelve men to serve him:
he calls us to do the same,
and Jesus sent them out to witness
telling people why he came.
Make us faithful like th'apostles,
Make us strong by heavenly grace,
To spread abroad the name of Jesus,
Saviour of the human race.

When the time had come to leave them
Jesus promised them that he
Would send from heaven the Holy Spirit
God's own strength to set them free.
By that self-same Spirit lead us,
In that freedom make us know
That your own life is there within us
Everywhere that we may go.

Glory be to God the Father,
Glory be to Christ the Son.
And Glory to the Holy Spirit,
God th'eternal Three –in-One.
Send us from this place to serve him,
Send us from this place to care,
Now send us to live out the gospel
In this town and everywhere.