

"ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS"

Luke 24:13-35

This is one of my favourite episodes of the Resurrection story. I don't really know why, but it really appeals to me. Maybe I identify with the emotions of the two walkers. Maybe it's because I used to spend a fair bit of time walking along country lanes when I was younger – and I particularly liked (still do) walking at dusk. Maybe it's the down-to-earth, matter-of-factness of the story – no angels, earthquakes or miracles – but I really do enjoy trying to put myself in the place of these two people.

We meet these two followers of Jesus travelling out from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus on the afternoon of Easter day. Much has been written about who these two people actually are and opinion is, as always, divided. I like the idea that Cleopas was accompanied by his wife here, but that still doesn't tell us much about them. There's also a good deal of debate about where Emmaus actually is, other than seven miles from Jerusalem. Indeed, some think it may have been only three and a half miles and the distance Luke gives is the round trip. Fortunately, what Luke has to say does not in any way depend on our being able to identify either the people or the village.

The two people are clearly deeply affected by the things that have happened over the weekend. They are engrossed in their discussion of it and the effect it has is to make them appear "*downcast*" (v17). They cannot seem to make out what has happened and why. From what they reply to Jesus (v18), the things that have happened have had quite an impact on the whole city, to the extent that they assume everyone knows about it. And as they are talking over these events, Jesus himself comes and walks along with them.

V16 is an intriguing verse, because it says that "*they were kept from recognising him.*" Some people have argued that this is a kind of divine intervention, that God somehow stopped them from seeing who their companion was. If that is the case, I'm not sure what purpose was served by it. It seems to me that they are just so affected by their grief and so unprepared for an appearance of Jesus that they simply do not recognise him. I often don't recognise people when I see them in a completely new context or without some uniquely identifiable appendage – like a hat or a wife! They may even have been wishing that this stranger would leave them alone and were more intent on giving him the cold shoulder to start with. Social convention may well have been a bit different in those days, but most of us are very suspicious – even resentful – when a complete stranger comes up and starts talking to us.

Anyway, Jesus does come alongside and asks them what they're talking about so intently. Maybe he has overheard something, or he's just wanting to appear friendly. Whatever it is, it is also interesting that he

doesn't actually say to them, "Look, it's me, folks. I'm alive." No doubt he has lessons for them to learn – and there are lessons to learn for subsequent readers of the story. Let's start by looking at the **Reply to Jesus' Question**.

1. THE REPLY TO JESUS' QUESTION (vv18-24)

The two walkers are initially surprised that the stranger doesn't know what's happened. After all, there have been crowds of people involved and various natural signs such as the eclipse and the earthquake. How could this person have remained ignorant of what's been going on? When he asks, "*What things?*" they begin to open up and to describe not only what has happened but also betray something of the struggle between hope and fear that has been going on in their own lives. Their sorrow has already been noted (v17), but there is also a strong element of disappointment (v21) and bewilderment (v22-24).

Their description of Jesus begins with a description of a man. There is no mention of the Messiah or of the Son of God: he is just "*a prophet*". And Luke has them refer to Jesus as "*Jesus of Nazareth*". That doesn't mean that they don't recognise his ministry – he was "*powerful in word and deed before God and all the people*". But this powerful person proved to be powerless in the face of death, it seems, and he was executed in shame rather than leading the people to triumph over the Romans, rather than redeeming Israel.

On top of that, it now seems as if his body has been stolen. People have seen visions and have heard angelic messengers, "*but him they did not see.*" The grand project has come to nothing and Jesus, the one in whom they had invested so much hope, is no more. They had wanted so much that he would be the Redeemer, the Messiah, but it seems to them that their hopes and dreams have come to nothing. It is a reply that seems filled with hopelessness.

And such responses are still made today by people who want to believe in Jesus of Nazareth the prophet and preacher, but cannot bring themselves to acknowledge him as the Risen Christ. There are, as we have said so many times, those who want to pick and choose which bits of Jesus they believe: the revolutionary, the political radical, the gentle counsellor, the clever teacher, the anti-establishment stirrer, the fundamentalist moralist. But without the resurrection, all of these caricatures are meaningless. It is only when the Risen Christ encounters us that we can truly say we call him Lord.

What difference does the resurrection make to you? Oh yes, we made a big thing about celebrating it a couple of weeks ago, but does it actually make a difference to your daily life? Do you ever think about it

and how it should affect your actions, your words, your hopes, your witness? Can others see Jesus alive in your life? “*You ask me how I know he lives: he lives within my heart*” we sing – is that obvious? You see, if we don’t actually allow Jesus to make a difference to our lives – not just his teaching, but his person - then we will end up “*downcast*”, disappointed, bewildered. We may know all there is to know about the words Jesus spoke. You may have heard other people tell you about their encounter with Jesus, but unless and until you actually allow him to touch your life by the power of his Holy Spirit, then you might as well be following anyone or anything.

2. **THE RETELLING OF JESUS’ STORY** (vv25-27)

When Jesus hears their reply, his initial reaction is not calculated to endear them to him. Look at what he says in v25. “You’re nuts,” he says. “Don’t you listen to anything.” And he goes on to retell the story that they should have been familiar with all along. It’s not just a question of Jesus coming along and being glorified, doing all the powerful and spectacular stuff. There’s a lot of suffering involved, too. He refers to himself as “*the Christ*”, the Messiah, and goes on to say that there’s an awful lot more to being the Messiah than being a powerful prophet and an acclaimed redeemer.

Jesus chides the two walkers for not paying attention to “*all that the prophets have spoken.*” Like so many other people down through the centuries, they have been selective in what they have believed from the Scriptures. The way of Christ is a way of suffering. And he shows them that from the whole of what we now call the Old Testament. The books of Moses as well as the writings of the prophets are part of the build up to the coming of the Messiah.

The way Luke records this is very important. He makes it clear that there is a suffering side to all this, but also lays the foundation for the use of the Old Testament in the rest of the New Testament. Luke himself does not quote from the Jewish Scriptures as much as, for example, Matthew, but he is still careful to include many allusions to it – it is part of his aim to examine and search everything to provide a complete apologetic of Christianity. And when you read through *Acts*, you see just how much the sermons he records there are dependent on the Old Testament for their support.

Some of the early Christians, under the leadership of a man called Marcion, did away with the Old Testament in their studies. They declared that it was not needed - indeed, that it was not worthy of attention for Christians. The Marcionites were soon condemned as heretics, but they have their descendants still today. Maybe they don’t actually formally deny the validity of the whole of the Bible, as Marcion did, but they act as if only some bits of it are appropriate – usually the bits that support what

they want to do – and ignore the rest, the bits that are uncomfortable, the bits that seem to go against their own behaviour. We can all fall prey to that temptation at times and it is vital that we get to grips with as much of the Bible as we can.

3. **THE RECOGNITION OF JESUS HIMSELF** (vv30-32)

When Jesus has finished his mobile Bible study with them, he is invited to stay with the walkers in their home, or in the inn where they were about to spend the night. He pretends that he wants to go further, but soon gives in and takes a meal with them. As their guest, he is invited to say the blessing over the bread and as he breaks it, they suddenly recognise him. [*Sometimes it is a particular action that prompts the recognition. I remember an incident from when I used to go along and watch Southampton and Winchester City on alternate weeks and the recognition of an old full-back called Dennis Hollywood whose trademark action was kicking the ball out of the ground.*] Maybe the more relaxed atmosphere of a shared meal means that they are less tense and more able to see what's really going on. Maybe, as some have suggested, they recognise in the action of Jesus' breaking the bread an echo of the shared Passover meal a few days before. Maybe the discussion they have had with Jesus has actually enabled them to have a more open mind about what has happened and a greater openness to the possibility of resurrection. Whatever the reason, they now find that the feeling they have had since he joined them on the road, their "*hearts burning within them*", is justified. It is Jesus, the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, who is there with them. But almost immediately, it seems, he disappears. The two walkers rush off to tell the others and arrive to find that Simon has seen Jesus too. The situation of despair and hopelessness has turned to celebration and delight.

It's often the case that we find ourselves in situations which are hopeless and desperate. Nothing seems to make sense. All we know is that, deep down, we believe something can happen; there is a way out. Actually, Jesus is with us in those situations. His presence is very real, but we don't immediately recognise it. When we do, when we finally acknowledge that Jesus is there with us, the despair turns to hope. It may not give us all the answers we want – these two walkers were probably left with more questions than answers – but it gives us the confidence that we need to face the future with hope.

Jesus met with these two walkers in a very ordinary situation. The circumstances might have been rather unusual, but they were just walking along a lane together. And when they finally recognised him they were sharing a simple evening meal together – as they might well have done with anyone whom they had met walking like that. There was nothing extraordinary in their situation – no tongues of fire, no rushing wind, no angelic messenger, no stirring sermon – just the sudden realisation that Jesus was alive and was

with them. We don't have to look for the spectacular to find Jesus. Yes, he may well make his presence felt at times of great drama or emotion, but more often than not we can simply encounter him in the everyday things of life.

He **is** there. And he wants to make a difference. He wants to show us more of himself in the Word of God. He wants to transform our hopelessness and despair into hope and joy. He longs for us to recognise him and acknowledge him. Jesus is alive – and he wants us to share that experience with him.