

Sermon – Year A
Benefice Service – Compton Abdale
Easter 3

Luke 24.13-35

This morning's gospel reading - The Walk to Emmaus - is laden with vital clues as to how we should live in the light of the resurrection.

Our reading begins with the words – on that same day, two of the disciples were going to a village called Emmaus...

The day in question is the day of resurrection. Immediately before this passage we're told how the women, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary and the others, came to the tomb early that morning to be greeted by an angel who told them that Jesus had risen, just as he had told them he would be. The women remember, and rush to the other disciples to share the good news.

Later that day it is two of these disciples, Cleopas and another, that are chatting to each another on the

seven-mile walk home to Emmaus from Jerusalem. As they walk they discover they are in company, though they do not recognise Jesus walking beside them. They strike up a conversation with this stranger about recent events with Jesus feigning ignorance as they pour out to him, his own story. Jesus challenges their despondency and lack of faith with a detailed exposition of the events they have just witnessed.

As they near Emmaus, Jesus makes to move on, but the disciples urge him to stay as it is now evening. And then, in that remarkable re-enactment of the Last Supper, Jesus reveals himself in the fourfold action of taking bread, giving thanks, breaking it and sharing it amongst them. And it is then, and only then, that their eyes are opened and they glimpse Jesus with them, before he disappears from their sight.

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” they say to one another.

Realising the truth of their experience, they make haste to return to Jerusalem, ignoring the late hour in order to share with the other disciples the joy of what they had experienced, “how he had been made known to us in the breaking of the bread”.

I love the idea of a pilgrimage, which is one of the reasons why I undertake the benefice walk each year. I love that sense of journeying with others, and the conversations one has on an extended walk can be truly remarkable and life-giving. Just like Cleopas and his fellow disciple, we too can fail to recognise the Jesus that walks alongside us, clothed perhaps in the face of a friend or the face of a stranger. Jesus may have surprised the disciples with his apparent ignorance of recent events and forced them to come to a sudden halt, but it is noticeable the patience with which they told Jesus his own story, without any hint of condescension or arrogance. And similarly how the disciples then listened to Jesus, open hearted to the knowledge and insights of this apparent stranger. Without looking at a further word of this passage, herein lies so much for us to learn about welcoming the insights of others, listening attentively and

especially taking seriously those with whom we appear to have so little in common.

A second theme in this passage – which is echoed in other resurrection stories – is the importance of recognising the significance of an event at the time it takes place. One of the reasons I love this encounter so very much is that I can recognise in it my own experience of being exposed to the presence of God and yet not recognising it, not acknowledging it, not affirming it at the time.

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

I repeat that question because it rings so true for me, and I suspect for many of you too. There are times when we know we have met Christ in a conversation, an event, when a thought or inspiration has literally come out of nowhere, and yet we are so hesitant to name it for what it is. Perhaps it is English reticence but more likely it is that mixture of embarrassment and fear that characterises the journey of faith. It is related too to the experience of the women at the

tomb when they suddenly realise that Jesus has done what he said he would do. We are so hesitant to trust the words of Jesus. I imagine the women, rushing back to the disciples, chattering to one another saying “what else did Jesus promise would happen? What else have we forgotten and failed to believe?”

And then Jesus, Cleopas and the other un-named disciple, sit down together to eat and Jesus breaks cover in the breaking of the bread.

It is a wonderful moment of recognition that opens the eyes of the disciples, and as they recognise Jesus, Jesus departs, leaving them to be his eyes and ears, hands and feet in the world.

We trace the institution of Holy Communion back to the last supper in Jerusalem, yet in one sense I think we should trace it back to this meal in Emmaus instead. After all, there is no particular sense at the last supper that the disciples understood what Jesus was doing in breaking bread, beyond giving them an act by which to remember him. At Emmaus Jesus gives us an act through which we meet him instead – that is a very different kind of gift.

I found our Maundy Thursday communion in the round service especially moving this year. There is something about physically breaking a loaf of bread and sharing it amongst ourselves that I find brings me closer to the events of the last supper and Emmaus than the more individualised Eucharist service. As an act it symbolises our unity in Christ’s presence and it is this that encourages me, and many other priests and Bishops, to welcome everyone at the Lord’s table, unreservedly. With the declining number of priests there is a real danger over the next decade that the number of communion services will begin to decline, especially in rural areas. It seems to me that this would be a far greater loss for the church than a decision to authorise any licensed minister to consecrate the bread and wine.

My final observation on this remarkable story of the walk to Emmaus by Cleopas and his fellow disciple, is the importance of their walk back.

This story may have been lost for eternity if those two disciples hadn’t been so enthused by their experience that despite the lateness of the hour, their

inevitable tiredness and the danger of the dark road back, they gathered themselves and set out immediately to return to Jerusalem and share their good news. Yet again we are being taught that our response to the active working of God in our lives must be to enable others to experience God also. This doesn't need to be in the mode of soapbox Peter as we heard in the reading from Acts. But we do need to share the story of God in our lives, not least by demonstrating to friend, relative and stranger alike, the impact God makes on the choices we make.

Do join me on the benefice walk if you are able; but wherever we journey, may our hearts and eyes be open to the presence of Christ alongside us, and may we have the strength and courage to share the goodness of his presence amongst our family, friends, work colleagues, fellow churchgoers. As Paul said in his letter to the Thessalonians, "encourage one another and build one another up, as indeed you are doing."

Amen