

Luke 24: 13-35

The Road to Emmaus

This is the passage which was used at my priesting. My friend preached – an ex-Franciscan nun – and she talked about the journey of Christian ministry, its challenges and its joys. The Road to Emmaus makes me recall a book called ‘On the Road’ by Jack Kerouac. This is a story of a person’s journey of discovery without any clear destination; it starts in chaos and ends in chaos, charting loneliness and disappointment along the way. It is a story of escape and retreat, but unlike the account in Luke’s Gospel, there is no framework for living, no belief system in evidence, and some of the characters of the story get hopelessly lost along the way.

Mostly, when we start out on any journey, we have an idea of the destination – we know where we are going. However, along the way we can experience unanticipated events, we may have to re-route, and when we reach the destination it may not be what we expected. The disciples on the road to Emmaus set-off to escape the politically charged atmosphere in Jerusalem. They were dejected and disappointed: *‘But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened.’*

These disciples had hoped Jesus would set Israel free and they did not understand how or why he had been rejected by the Jewish rulers. Now it was the ‘Third Day’ and they recalled a prophesy of his Resurrection on this day, but they had not heard of anybody seeing him. An empty tomb did not provide enough evidence for his Resurrection. All their hopes and dreams had proved illusory. Or had they?

These disciples are on the point of losing the faith they had invested in Jesus. It is into this moment of despair that Jesus pops up beside them. Frustrated by Jesus’ failure, and agitated that this stranger seemed oblivious to news-breaking recent events, they are blind to the stranger’s identity, *‘...their eyes were kept from recognising him.’*

How often do we also fail to recognise Jesus as he accompanies us on the road? We don’t recognise him because often our attention is focused on other things. We are not in the right frame of mind to receive Jesus.

Unperturbed, Jesus dispels their disillusionment by expounding the Scriptures; not by quoting a random handful of proof texts, but by systematically examining God’s redemptive call throughout the Old Testament. If the Messiah, the King of Israel, embodies in his own person and character the vocation of the People of Israel - of which he is leader and representative – then the Cross is not a cause for dejection, but a necessary element in the divine purpose of redemption.

The author of the Gospel, St. Luke, is claiming that underlying all the OT writings there is a common pattern of God’s dealings with his people, which was meant to foreshadow the ministry - including the suffering - of Jesus.

Nearing the end of their journey, the disciples offer hospitality to this anonymous scriptural expositor. They finally come to recognise Jesus in '*the breaking of the bread*'. The disciples mentioned here were not of the Twelve, so would not have witnessed the actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, but perhaps from other meals and the occasions of the feeding miracles. In this scene, St. Luke is anticipating the Eucharistic observances of the early church, describing how Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and shared it with them.

The disciple Cleopas may be the Clopas of John 19:25, and if so, his wife Mary had been one of the group of women at the foot of the cross. The two disciples evidently lived in the same house and therefore could have been Clopas and Mary – husband and wife. Whoever they were, they initially head off in the wrong direction. They are retreating.

There is no rebuke from the Risen Jesus as he falls into step with them on the road. Jesus listens to their deepest concerns and asks them questions. He offers new understanding from the scriptures and gives them space to draw their own conclusions. Herein lies the power of the word of God; it can speak to us even in the depths of bewilderment and shed new light on desperate situations. But, when we open the word of God it needs time, attention and the necessary space to hear what Jesus is communicating to us – then indeed *our hearts may burn within us*.

Jesus *appeared to be going further* when the disciples reach their destination. There is no hint that without the invitation to supper he would have taken his rest. The day might have been *far spent* but his work was not yet complete.

'*Stay with us*', the disciples implore. This may tell us something about the power of invitation. Jesus waits for us to invite him into our lives and homes. Entertaining strangers can, as Abraham discovered, bring with it the blessing of God. Invite the Risen Christ into all that you do.

This encounter is the first appearance of the Risen Christ in Luke's Gospel. It is Easter Day, the Day of Resurrection, and Jesus is walking on. This Day will never come to an end. Indeed, it is a start for the two travellers who promptly get up and go back the way they came; back to Jerusalem to share the Good News. Their journey of proclamation has only just begun. Far from being a dead-end destination, the trip to Emmaus has set them up for a new life with Christ as their ever-present companion.

In life we also, sometimes, have to retrace our steps; or need time to gather our thoughts and draw conclusions, or revisit previous conclusions, or acknowledge when we are on the wrong path. We may not fully know or understand where we are going, or perhaps we feel we have reached a place where we can rest and stay. God gives us fellow travellers on the road and provides refreshment, and for these people we give thanks. Vitally, Jesus himself has promised to be our constant companion and guide. The question is, how do we recognise his presence and gentle leading? It is never too late to invite Jesus to accompany us, nor to reconsider where we are and how we got there.

Let's pray:

We praise and thank you, God of the journey,

For all your gifts to us in the past.

We look to you as fellow-traveller and faithful companion on the way ahead.

Shelter and protect us from all harm and anxiety;

Give us grace to let go of all that holds us back;

And grant us courage to meet the new life you have promised us

In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Ely 2025 diocesan strategy prayer