

Luke 24:13-35 – The Journey on the Road to Emmaus

The story we've just heard of the disciples travelling on the road to Emmaus, opens with two people going the wrong way. The entire momentum of Luke's gospel is in the direction of Jerusalem. It is to that city that Jesus sets his face. There he cleanses the Temple, there he celebrates the Last Supper, there he is raised from the dead, there he sends the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. These two followers of Jesus are heading away from the holy city. They're heading in the wrong direction.

We've no shortage of more recent public examples of professed followers of Christ heading in the wrong direction. But, we might say, these two disciples have good reason to be disconsolate. Only a week earlier they'd been in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, believing the Messiah had come. The tyranny of Rome was about to be broken. The crowds would rise up to follow the great prophet. But it hadn't worked out like this. Their inspirational leader was dead. The testimony of the women from the empty tomb left them confused. Faith had gone. Hope disappeared.

But a stranger joins them on their journey. A stranger. Jesus himself comes near and simply walks with them – *'but their eyes were kept from recognising him'*. We must not neglect both the ordinariness and strangeness of the resurrection appearances. He walks alongside them and begins to explore the scriptures with them. He explains it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and die. The whole arc of God's salvation is unveiled. Their hearts burn within them but still the stranger is unrecognised.

At Emmaus they press him to stay and share a meal with them. He takes the bread. He says the blessing. He breaks and hands it to them. The Last Supper echoing in their minds – *'this is my body, broken for you...do this in remembrance of me'*. He is no longer their guest. He is the host.

Their eyes are opened, they recognise Him and, paradoxically, he vanishes from their sight. It matters not. Their journey has been one that has established the truth of Jesus' risen presence. Jesus lives. He is known in the breaking of bread. So what do they do? They turn back. They return to Jerusalem. They return to the right path to tell others *'The Lord has risen indeed'*.

This is not just their journey. It's the journey we make at every Eucharist. In the company of others, we're invited to travel the same road. We too set out in the wrong direction repeatedly. So we begin with confession. We have not loved God with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. We own our disappointments and confusions of the past. Together we listen to the reading and explanation of God's Word and our hearts burn in worship when we recognise the truth. Often fleeting. Often only a glimpse, as someone described to me their experience of the joy here on Easter Sunday. We move from scripture to sacrament. We gather at the Lord's table - a meal at which Christ himself is the host. Bread is blessed and broken and God is in our midst.

We are invited to receive Him. It's an invitation that can prompt deep emotion. Someone on Easter Sunday, invited to church not having been for many years, coming forward and filled with tears on receiving a blessing. And lastly comes the dismissal – *'Go in the peace of Christ'*. *'Send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory'*. Von Balthasar said that Jesus vanished immediately after being recognised at Emmaus because he disappears *into the mission of the Church*. So the Eucharistic Christ becomes our mission and our work. We are sent out to our homes, our places of work, to the city. Go and make known what you have seen and heard.

Every Eucharist can become a journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back. What really matters it that we return with our perspectives changed. A change that is brought through deeper knowledge of ourselves, a new awareness of our neighbour and, above all, having recognised God's self-giving love.

As we sing in our offertory hymn – *‘Soar we now where Christ has led, following our exalted Head’*. Notice in the gospel, Jesus walks ahead of the disciples on the road *‘as if he were going on’*, we’re told. We are here to represent God’s future. The Church is to be a sign of God’s intention for the world – a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints, messy, broken, searching but recognising and proclaiming salvation in Christ, who is present with us in the breaking of bread.

Perhaps it’s all the more tangible in the Easter season. At the firing of confetti canons and the joys of Easter Day. But it is there with us too on the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time. On the evening of All Souls Day. Even on Good Friday because Jesus is risen.

On the reverse of your psalm sheet, you will find Caravaggio’s painting of the encounter at Emmaus. Its details and meaning could fill a whole sermon. But notice just this. The artist leaves an open space where the light is falling on the right side, with room enough for another chair. The fruit, in immaculate detail, is right on the edge of the table, almost about to fall, as if being passed to us. Will we leap up from our chair and receive what Christ blesses and offers to us, with arms open as the two seated disciples are poised to do. Or will we look on like the bystander standing on the left, unmoved and oblivious to the miraculous scene unfolding before Him, the one who even at the moment of revelation refuses to have his eyes opened. The invitation is to us all.

May we receive the invitation set before us, recognise Christ in this Eucharist, become living signs of God’s future and go with joy to tell others *‘The Lord has risen indeed’*. Amen.