

The road to Emmaus

St. Brandon's

Luke 24: 13-35

30th April 2017

'Jesus set for surprise City return after rapid recovery from foot injury.' So read the headline in the football pages of the Guardian last Saturday! One wonders whether the journalist did that deliberately, only a week after Easter, or whether he had no idea, in this largely secular society, of the possible Christian connections. What, one wonders, might be the headline associated with the road to Emmaus. 'Jesus' ability to appear from nowhere challenges defences', perhaps.

The road to Emmaus is a wonderful story, but also frustrating and tantalizing. It's frustrating because we don't get to know much about the disciples; who were they and why this journey at this point? One was Cleopas, and in John's gospel Mary the wife of Clopas was one of those standing at the foot of the cross. Perhaps Cleopas was the husband of that particular Mary, though if so Luke doesn't say so, doesn't say, 'Cleopas, the husband of Mary' (funny that). Perhaps the other disciple was Mary herself, although it's usually assumed that it was another man. Then why the journey? Seven miles, late afternoon, lots of odd things going on in Jerusalem – what was the urgency in getting to Emmaus? And then it's tantalising: why didn't they recognise Jesus for almost the whole time they were with Him; and why did they recognise Jesus when He broke the bread; and how did Jesus simply vanish from their sight?

Well, we're not going to get answers to all of those questions, so perhaps it's better to start with what we do know, or at least can surmise. First, they're called disciples, and they've obviously been involved with the events leading up to Jesus' death; they know all about them. They're obviously part of the 'in crowd' because they know of the goings on that very morning, the hints of resurrection as yet unconfirmed. And, since they recognise Jesus when He breaks the bread, perhaps they had also been present at the Last Supper – it seems possible that more than just the Apostles were present (see Mark 14: 12-25). But they're not Apostles, they are in a sense just ordinary disciples, like you or me, one of whose names isn't even recorded.

Second, they obviously have a place to stay in Emmaus because they invite Jesus in to stay with them, and since no one else is mentioned when they arrive there, perhaps it's their place and they're just locals who live there, and it was time to get back and check the house out, ensure the triple lock was still in place.

But third, it's fairly obvious that their lives have just been turned up-side-down. They had invested in this Jesus. They had hoped that He might be the one to redeem Israel. They had come to believe in Him, put their trust in Him, and now He seemed to have let them down, and the 'system' seemed to have won. And their lives were in turmoil. What was going on? And not just that, but what was God playing at?

And into that turmoil in their lives, the risen Christ comes and walks alongside them.

Now why "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" is not easy to explain, except perhaps that they did not expect to see Him – they even call Him a stranger. (I don't want to dwell on that now, but will come back to it later.) Then, when they've told their side of the story, Jesus chides them for their slowness of heart (not their mind), and Jesus retells the story from His side, opening up the scriptures to them so that their hearts (not their minds) burn within them. It is as though, as the hymn that we'll sing shortly puts it, "All now mysterious shall be clear at last".¹

But it only becomes completely clear when they persuade Jesus to stay with them, and when this stranger turned guest all of a sudden becomes the host. It is Jesus, not them, who takes the bread, blesses and breaks it, and it is in that moment that a kind of flash-back occurs, and they are at the Last Supper again, and their

¹ 'Be still, my soul'. No. 54 in *Hymns Old & New*.

eyes are opened and they recognize Jesus. And it is at that very moment that Jesus vanishes from their sight. They see Jesus and then they don't see Jesus. It may be less mysterious, but it's still tantalizing.

But it's also hugely energising. It's dark – so what? It's seven miles – so what? It might be dangerous – so what? They have to get back to Jerusalem, they have to tell the others.²

Now I suspect that all of us can relate to this story in some way or other. We're just ordinary disciples too, and we've invested in Jesus. And yet our lives probably have had, maybe have now, at least episodes where some kind of turmoil has come upon them. And it's worth making the obvious point that there were two of them. It's very easy to personalise this, but it's equally legitimate to think of it in social terms. Perhaps for some of us here the fire 18.5 years ago would be an example. There was some turmoil! What was going on? And not just that, but what was God playing at? And it may be that, even if the fire wasn't an 'act of God' as insurers sometimes say, it has been only gradually over that time that we have been able to see that the risen Christ came into that turmoil, and has been walking alongside us ever since.

But for me and for our family, recently, and maybe for you, there have been more personal situations, in some cases family situations, where it has felt like turmoil. Two work colleagues, both with so much still to give, one with cancer, the other with Motor Neurone Disease. Family situations – a son who had trained for Christian ministry but whose vocation seemed to have come to an abrupt end; two grandsons with autism; another grandson with anencephaly who died at birth; Alison's younger sister who died of cancer less than a year ago. What is going on? And not just that, but what is God playing at?

But I think I / we can say, in the middle of those turmoils, that the risen Christ has come and walked alongside us. Have we always recognised Him? Ah! Perhaps not. But that does not mean that He was not there. Have we recognised Him occasionally at least, perhaps in some equivalent of the breaking of bread? Well, perhaps yes. Has He seemed to vanish almost as soon as we did recognise Him? Certainly, but that seems to be the pattern. Have our hearts rejoiced when we have seen the risen Lord? Yes, though I'm sure not as much as they might. Has the presence of the risen Christ been energising? Certainly in the sense of being enabled to carry on, even if we haven't made too many late night dashes to tell others. But perhaps we should. Is everything well now, and clear now? No, not at all. But one day perhaps it might be.

For the risen Jesus is like this. He has an uncanny ability to appear out of nowhere, to challenge our defences, to walk alongside us in our turmoil, and to reveal Himself to us. And in that, and ultimately I think only in that, is there hope that all will be well, and all now mysterious will be clear at last.

Amen

² I learned afterwards that it's also uphill from Emmaus to Jerusalem!