



Revd Ro's Reflection on Third Sunday of Easter

Year A

Luke 24.13-35

Acts 2.14a 36-41

Whenever I write about Christ's meeting with his followers on the Emmaus Road I have the painting by Caravaggio alongside. It depicts the blessing of the bread by Jesus and the two followers' epiphany moment at the wonderful realisation of who is breaking bread with them. One of the courses the church follows is called 'Emmaus' because it is a journey together to come nearer the truth of the risen Jesus.

The account of Jesus' appearance only occurs in the gospel of Luke. It comes before his appearance to the disciples in the upper room and so differs from the reading from John which we looked at last week. We are told in Luke's gospel that Mary Magdalene visited the tomb in the early morning but she was not alone, she had other women with her, followers of Jesus.

¹⁰ 'Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.' (Luke 24)

They were given the news by the angels and went to tell the disciples that the Lord had risen. Peter rushes to the tomb and looks in but he sees only the linen wrappings, then we are told he returned home.

There follows the account of the appearance of Jesus on the Emmaus Road.

¹³ 'Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.'

Luke is specific in telling us where Emmaus was. This encounter always makes me think of the hymn, 'We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road.' I wonder if the story of the walk to Emmaus inspired it. At first we are not told who these two people are except that they are followers of Jesus. Their minds must have been in turmoil. All their hopes dashed and Jesus killed in such a cruel way. It was all done by their own leaders for without them, and their rabble rousing, Pilate

would have freed him. It must have been a depressed pair of men who trudged slowly homewards along that hot and dusty road. Then suddenly we are told Jesus appeared and began to walk with them. It doesn't say he has a different body but that they were 'kept' from recognising him. It is of vital importance to make clear that Jesus' resurrection body is a real physical body. This is no ghost, no spirit. Jesus has conquered death, he is 'the first fruits from the dead' it is because of his resurrection that we can affirm 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.' That is central to our faith.¹⁷ 'And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'¹⁹ He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.'

Now at least one of them is identified as Cleopas, a follower of Jesus, though not one of the twelve. So much is summed up about the disintegration of their hopes in these few words, 'They stood still, looking sad.' It is such a human state of mind and one we understand and empathise with. Mary was devastated as she stood weeping at the mouth of the empty tomb. They are at rock bottom. Here they believed was their long awaited Messiah, he was to redeem Israel and set them free from the cruelty of Roman oppression. With Jesus came a new order as the scriptures had foretold. But they are forgetting that the scriptures told of a 'suffering servant' a 'man of sorrows' who would give his life to set them free. Jesus himself had foretold his death and passion, but he had also told them of the certainty of resurrection. Yet still they cannot understand. This episode is such a human scene. 'Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.'²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

Notice how Luke says, 'it is the third day' echoing Jesus' promise of resurrection on the third day. They relate what had happened to the women and the message that Jesus had risen. The disciples see the empty tomb but they hadn't seen him. What on earth were they to think? It was all too much to take in. Like Thomas they felt seeing is believing. It is now that Jesus speaks to them of the Messiah, he points them to their own scriptures. You can almost hear his irritation, how on earth can you fail to understand!

²⁵ 'Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.'

So he reminds them of where the Scriptures point to him as Messiah. Without Good Friday there is no Easter Day. Jesus had to suffer at Calvary. He bore the weight of our sins on his shoulders on the cross; by his death he won salvation for us and by his resurrection won eternal life with our loving Father.

Still they do not recognise him; still they are blind to the fact that this man walking alongside them is the risen Lord.

²⁸ 'As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.

They offer hospitality to the stranger. Roads at night were dangerous for the lone traveller; we have only to think of the story of the treatment of the lone traveller on the Jericho road. So they offer hospitality and a safe lodging. Stay and eat with us, share fellowship. Now comes their epiphany,

³⁰ 'When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.'

Luke wishes us to go straight back to Jesus' actions at the Last Supper with his disciples, 'Take and eat this is my body broken for you,' as he breaks the bread. Now they understand, now they see him as Jesus their risen Lord. We can imagine the scene in the flickering lamplight, all eyes focussed on the hands of Jesus as he sits in the pool of light and blesses and breaks the bread. Did they see the marks of the nails on those hands? There is no doubt in their minds now, the scales are removed. They have walked with their Messiah and God.

³² 'They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'

Now they cannot understand how they could be so blind to Jesus' true identity. I love the phrase, 'hearts burning within us,' it would be hard to better that description of their feelings. They, like the women, rush back to the disciples; the wonderful news has to be given at once.

³³ 'That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' ³⁵Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.'

Jesus is alive, misery is turned to joy. They carry back the news that changed history. Only God can conquer death. Jesus is Messiah and Lord. Our reading ends here but in verse 36,

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.'

I quote it in full because if the disciples are to carry out the good news they must understand the fundamental truth of the bodily resurrection. Jesus is no ghost, no spirit, he is alive. Death has no dominion. He speaks and he eats with them. When they receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost they will not only be strengthened they will be enlightened as to the truth of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. And they will be able to witness to it. For now they rejoice because they have seen the Lord.

In Acts Luke shows us the effects of the Holy Spirit on his followers.

^{2.1} 'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.'

When they go out into the street to face the crowd each person hears them speaking in their own language. Naturally some scoff and doubt, those who can only hear babble say they must be drunk. Peter addresses that head on, 'What at this time in the morning?' Then he speaks out without fear. ²² 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— ²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law.'

You saw his signs, you saw his miracles, and you know he brought the dead to life in God's name and through God's power. He was the Messiah, the one for whom you have waited, the one to whom all the scriptures point. What did you do? You handed him over to evil men and they gave him to the Romans but you demanded his blood. You are guilty of it! Wow. At an ordination service the bishop asks the candidate various questions and the answer is, 'With the help of God we will.' In our own strength we can't, with Jesus, in God's strength we can. So it is with Peter. As he makes clear, Jesus was killed, he was buried, but that is not the end of the story. God raised him from the dead, and he has poured out his Holy Spirit on us so we address you now.

³² 'This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. ³³ Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.'

The reaction of the crowd is not what we might expect. Instead of anger, even violence we see guilt, sorrow and shame. How can they make amends? That is their concern.

³⁷ 'Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?'

Jesus has promised forgiveness of sins to those who truly repent, he prayed for those knocking in the nails and so Peter answers-

³⁸ 'Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

That is the wonderful promise, your sins are forgiven and you will receive the Holy Spirit. These are the words at our baptism service. As Acts says, the promise of God is for all believers,

³⁹ 'For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'

Here we have it; Jesus came into the world to save all who turn to him, Jews and Gentiles. Here we have one of the most wonderful accounts of the beginnings of the early church as thousands turned to Jesus.

⁴⁰ 'And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' ⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptised, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.'

The last is a tiny sentence but it is the pattern of Christian life. Notice that the Eucharist is at the heart, the breaking of bread. They worship and they follow the apostles' teaching. Prayer is at the centre of their lives. This is the Spirit filled church. They also 'devoted themselves to fellowship.' That unity and care for one another must be at the heart of the church. May we remember his great commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.'

We pray that God may enter our lives and fill us with his Holy Spirit.

*'Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world.'* St. Theresa of Avila

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