

26th April 2020

Today's Reading:

Luke 24:13-35 the road to Emmaus

- from Revd. David Hildred



This week's resurrection reading takes us back to the afternoon and evening of that first Easter Day. We join a couple of disciples on the road to Emmaus, perhaps this is where they live. They are unremarkable disciples: only one of them is named, Cleopas, and we don't know whether the other one is a man or a woman. And so, suddenly, every single one of us is drawn into this incident. This is not just about your super-apostles who will set up churches, preach in unreached places and be remembered as St This and St That; no, this is also about the unremarkable, the unnamed disciples, who also need to meet the risen Lord Jesus.

Let's remind ourselves how this fits in with what else has been happening on that day. The women had been to the tomb in the morning and discovered the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb. Mary Magdalene met Jesus, but she thought he was the gardener. The women went back and told the disciples that Jesus is alive. Peter and John run to the tomb, but don't see Jesus, only the grave clothes, but it's enough to make John believe.

These two on the way to Emmaus are clearly confused by the day's events and are going to Emmaus with heavy hearts. By the grace of God they are joined by Jesus on that journey, yet, like Mary Magdalene earlier in the day, they are kept from recognising him. Their eyes are yet to be opened, or as Paul puts it, the veil is yet to be removed (2 Cor 3:14). Let's see what makes the difference.

I guess you are used to hearing the phrase, “The Gospel according to Matthew” - or Mark, or Luke, or John - and what we mean by that is how these disciples have recorded the life of Jesus so that we get to benefit from their eye-witness testimony, and their careful selection of incidents about Jesus. In this passage today we have “The Gospel according to Cleopas”, and it’s a pretty good Gospel, though as we have said, with something still to be seen.

In v19 Jesus draws out of Cleopas what he knows, what he has experienced, perhaps in order to see what he lacks and how that might be addressed. Cleopas says that Jesus was a prophet. That’s a good start. We know there is more to Jesus than being just one of a long line of prophets that have been sent by God, but it’s an accurate start.

He says Jesus was powerful in word and deed. That’s a great testimony to what Jesus has said and done during those three years of ministry on earth. Again, it’s helpful, reminding us that Jesus really did walk the planet.

He says Jesus did all this before God and all the people. Cleopas was clear that what Jesus did was worthy in the sight of God - he was Godly, he was sent by God - and that it was plain to all the people; it is not a secret, hidden, cultish faith that Jesus was introducing.

Cleopas recalls the cross; something that had happened just three days ago. He is accurate in saying that at the human level it had been a plot by the religious leaders to get rid of Jesus, by using the Roman authorities to secure his grisly end.

And then comes a remarkable phrase: Cleopas says that the disciples had hoped that Jesus was the one who was going to redeem Israel. He recognised that there was supposed to be something more to Jesus than just dying on a cross. This is the bit that he hasn't fully seen yet, but it shows he was looking for it.

His Gospel also includes the witness to the resurrection, by referring to the lack of body in the tomb, and that it was news that was to be proclaimed, passed on.

There were two things that Cleopas and his companion lacked: a fuller understanding of Scripture and an encounter with the risen Lord. What an amazing Bible study they had on that roadside walk with Jesus, to discover in all the Scriptures those things that pointed to Jesus (v27)! And it was such an exciting study that Cleopas describes it as a matter of "our hearts burning within us" (v32).

But it was not just the study that produced that heartburn - it was while Jesus spoke with them on the road - and that 'strange warming' resulted in a full-flame heart on fire when they sat at the table and had a meal with Jesus.

It would be very odd (v30) for the visitor to take charge of the meal and break bread and say the blessing, in the way that many Jewish meals begin, but that was the moment of recognition for these two disciples. We don't know why. Was it because their attention was drawn to his hands and they saw the nail marks? Was it because he had a particular way of doing it which he had introduced them to four days ago at the Last Supper? We don't know, but it was at that moment, as he broke the bread, that their eyes were fully opened.

Everything fell into place for them. The Gospel of Cleopas was no longer just a list of accurate facts about Jesus, it became a lively encounter with Jesus that stirred them to the core of their being.

What is the Gospel according to David, according to Carol, according to Jenny, according to Steve? It's going to have the same elements, isn't it? We can come up with a list of things that everyone needs to know about Jesus (the cross, the resurrection would be two), and then we can share our story of how Jesus is alive to us - maybe it was through a particular Bible study, or by seeing an answer to prayer, or by the Bible making sense of a spiritual experience I've had, or of seeing Jesus through his body, the church, or of God's creation pointing me firmly to the Creator, and so on in many other different ways.

Jesus travelled with them unrecognised at first, but he was with them on that journey. Let's keep our eyes open for those encounters with Jesus on our journey that will then become part of the Gospel that we share with others. Notice that it's Scripture and Experience that go hand in hand together to give us the fullness of all that God has for us through Jesus. Both the Scripture and the Experience point to Jesus: is there something you can immediately think of that is your experience of Jesus? If not, let's pray that our eyes will be open to him this week even.