

Hope

Luke 24:13-34

For some people Luke chapter 24, and particularly the story of the Road to Emmaus, is the most important thing in the whole Bible. I can see why. When we had evening services, I would always use this story on Easter Sunday evening as preparation to share communion around this table. One of the character's in James Runcie's book, 'The Road to Grantchester', says that he likes to think of the meal shared by Jesus and the two disciples at Emmaus as the First Supper, after the Last Supper in the upper room on Maundy Thursday.

So much of the faith of the Bible is based around tables. In several of the resurrection appearances Jesus eats, and this one is no different. There's a famous painting of the scene by Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus*, with Christ, arms outstretched, blessing the two people with Him who are suddenly realising Who is with them, light in the darkness, and the simplicity of bread and gesture. "It is a fable of invitation and blessing in paint."ⁱ

Before we get to the table of Emmaus, we have to travel along the road to Emmaus. If hospitality one of the central parts of Christianity, so also is the need for movement. The Christian faith is a faith of dynamic. It involves movement, sometimes physical, always spiritual. A faith that stands still, that does not express itself, is a faith that won't survive. The movement of faith is often expressed in hope. Hope is not static; it is also dynamic. It makes us lift up our heads, it makes us strain our eyes to the far horizon. That's what hope does.

But it often takes time to get there, and the disciples need to keep moving towards it, as do we. It's so easy to get stuck in the dark place, and not keep moving on towards light, and hope.

In the story, Cleopas, and the unnamed disciple (could it be his wife?) leave Jerusalem for Emmaus. It is a seven mile journey. It's a deep conversation, and their hearts are heavy. Confused, fearful, they had heard of 'Easter' but they do not know what to do with the story of a risen Jesus, or even if it is true.

On this road of broken dreams and unfulfilled hope the two disciples are joined by an incognito Jesus. When heads are down and hearts are heavy and eyes are full of tears it is hard to see hope, even when it walks beside you through the dark place.

“What are the conversations we have on the way to nowhere in particular when the horizon stretches only as far as the petty pace of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow permits? What should we do when we have reached our wit’s end, when what we once thought was worth our lives has left us washed up emotionally, financially, physically, spiritually?”ⁱⁱ

I wonder if that speaks to many of us today? In what sometimes feels like the hopelessness and the helplessness of these days, being told, honestly, that we’re not approaching the end of the COVID crisis but stuck somewhere in the middle with honest uncertainty about what will, can, should happen next, saps our energy, and our hope. This begins to feel not so much like the Road to Emmaus but the forty year wandering of the Israelites in the desert. It feels as if fate rather than destiny is our lot.

We all have to decide what do to with these times that have been given to us, and when the road ahead seems long, or uncertain, there’s little else for it other than to soldier on. As we take this hard road through COVID-19, where will the hope come? What are the lessons we can learn from this time teach us? Who are the unexpected fellow-travellers along the way we might meet as we journey on?

Ecologists tell us that the battered earth is recovering a little from humanity’s actions. The air is purer with less cars and planes polluting. The soiled canals of Venice now run with clear water in them.

Observers of society tell us that something is changing in our world as we realise who the truly valuable people are to our economy and well-being, and they are not, currently, the well-paid.

Technology enables, where we let it, imagination to flourish and connections to be made. Friends and others, with no time in the usual busy run of life, now make time to speak and reconnect with those they haven’t been in touch with for years.

Politicians and journalists are learning that the moods of their nations quickly weary with the endless diet of point-scoring and blaming. We are too easily conditioned to believe that things are always going to get worse. Life is scarcely a bed of roses at the moment, but good things, persistently, keep happening, and whilst we should not avoid holding to account what is not right in this time, equally we should not dismiss as escapist naivety the countless actions of kindness and loveliness that push up through the darkness and tell us of a better world, and real hope.

As they journeyed from Jerusalem Jesus joins the disciples, and as they begin to tell their story, "They stood still." And then they tell Him, "We had hoped that He was the one to redeem..." the sad disciples say on the Road to Emmaus, not realising the One they say it to is the very One Who is set to do this, and to continue to do this, till the roads of the world run straight, the waters of the world run clear, and the air of the world runs pure.

Having stood still, Jesus moves them on, until they arrive at Emmaus as the shadows lengthen and the busy world is hushed. The unrecognised Jesus looks as if He plans to go further, doesn't He always? But He is persuaded to stop and stay, and share at meal, and at last the disciples realise Who it is. Their eyes open with astonishment and understanding. Perhaps they realise that God's other name is Surprise.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hope often comes to us a surprise. Despite God's long history with the world, surprising it's people with ways ahead, resilience, healing and comfort, we find ourselves, perhaps to our embarrassment, surprised all too often by the God of hope.

The Road to Emmaus story moves us from isolation to community. The fearful, doubting, sad isolated disciples at the beginning of the journey end up in community with Jesus at the end of the road. Jesus joined them on the way, and then they make space for Him in their homes. That in itself, at this time, is a sign of hope. The two disciples, eyes opened at last, not that their experience needed to be shared, and return to Jerusalem, to share their story, and to learn that others had experienced the hope of the risen Jesus too.

Outside the Church stands one of my favourite trees. The white cherry blossom is looking magnificent, and the recent sunny weather shows it off at its best. Through the winter the tree

looks unpromising, and then, almost without our noticing, suddenly the bud and then the blossom. We see its beauty, and give thanks for the hopefulness of Spring of which blossom speaks. Then it goes, and we forget, but in the tree the cycle of promise, and revelation rolls round each year. It's a sign of hope revealed. See in its blossom the promise of Jesus, the hope of the world, coming around year after year, come what may.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ James Runcie, *The Road to Grantchester*, p148

ⁱⁱ Cynthia A Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2*, p421

ⁱⁱⁱ Roger A Paynter, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2* p355