

Stay with us*Luke 24:13-35*

'The story of Jesus' appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus is often told as a story of the disciples' recognition of Jesus in the breaking of the bread. So it is'.ⁱ But it is so much more than this, and that's saying something. This is a story, is it a parable, still set on that first Easter evening, but clearly the emphasis is about moving on from the dazzling lights of Easter morning, and its choruses of alleluia. Disciples are on the move. Disciples are on the road. Disciples are, perhaps like many Jews after the Passover, returning home and the ordinary and the everyday. But wondering what the stories around Jesus might be and might mean. And night is falling.

"Easter is no genuine celebration unless it touches the private wounds and the tragedies near-at-hand...it is not truly good news until it gets down to the local issues. This is the beauty of Luke's story...when all is said and done...the truth of Easter belongs not only on the front page of the newspaper, but also on the back page, and middle pages, nestling among the items of local news. This is a story of how the cosmic truth of Christ's resurrection comes home as a local issue."ⁱⁱ

I've been on the modern road to Emmaus, and it feels more like a motorway now, but in C1st AD Palestine it was not a highway, but more like a village lane, a local thoroughfare, a B-road. A seven-mile journey. It was then, as now, a place of movement, of transportation, of journey. Christians hearing Luke's tale in the first century would have smiled knowingly. People of 'The Way' was the first nickname given to the earliest Christians. They were the people of the road. People who, as they travelled, encountered Jesus, and shared with Jesus. In this story of Emmaus, Jesus meets people as they travel and encounter and move onwards. On this road of broken dreams and confusion, Jesus walked with His friends.

Jesus is also encountered by them in the breaking of the bread. Those first Christians would have smiled knowingly at the 'breaking of the bread' reference too. It clearly echoed the description of the feeding of the five thousand. They are the words found in the description of the Lord's Supper. "Took...blessed...broke...gave..." Each time at that great meal of remembering, echoing the Last Supper, Christians do the same thing, and encounter the reality of Jesus' sacrifice and love.

It seems to me that the link between these two forms of encountering Jesus is found in what the disciples ask Jesus to do as they travelled towards their destination at Emmaus. "Stay with us", they asked Him, before they even knew Who He was. "Stay with us."

Jesus is encountered on the move. Jesus is encountered in the breaking of the bread. And Jesus is also encountered in location when He *stays* with us. "I will be with you always", Jesus promises. Then. And now. To be with us, the God-with-us, Jesus has to stay with us. He is as much our guest as we are His.

Hospitality is at the heart of the Christian experience of God; and it is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian as we offer it to others. It can be the celebration of the Coronation in a few weeks' time (get your tickets today!), it can be at the Wednesday coffee morning where one of our visitors from the Royal Edinburgh Hospital said to me last Wednesday, "I feel so welcome here." It can be in the words of a distressed young woman who came to our Remembering Service last Sunday, who wouldn't sit up with the others in the chancel area, but in a seat right at the back of the Church. Who said to me, 'Thank you for letting me stay.' It could be in the words of a child at a recent wedding, wanting to be allowed to stay to see God's blessing of people she cared about, her first 'grown-up' experience she told me. It could be at the bedside of a dying parishioner, drifting between life and death, joining in with the words of the Lord's Prayer which would have been amongst the last words they spoke as a ray of evening sun came in through their window.

Jesus travels, He travels and moves all over. But He also stays, He rests with us for a time, and settles into moments of peace, to be found not only in the words but in the companionable silences between the words.

“Stay with us”, Jesus.

Stay with us in the times of joy, when our hearts are full, and we need someone to keep us focussed and centred, even to calm us down when we are over-excited.

Stay with us in times of grief, when our hearts are also full, and the words often fail us, and the tears are nearby, and the emptiness makes our soul ache.

Stay with us when we need community, company, friendship, to break the lonesome hours and days, and we feel set aside, or overlooked, or isolated for so many different reasons.

Stay with us when the burdens of life are considerable. The work that piles up and up, whether we are in paid employment or volunteers, and we feel it all depends on us, and we don't want to let anyone down, but we need help and strength.

Stay with us in places that make us afraid, the hospital ward, or the dentist's surgery, or the exam hall, or the new work-place, or the old one.

Stay with us, when we have to make a presentation, or speak in public when that doesn't come naturally to us, or when we need to have that 'difficult conversation' with a loved one.

Stay with us when in some, if not all, areas of our political world brokenness and bullying, cover-up and spin make us wonder how we will be governed, and by whom; and where is the integrity and the public service we so desperately need. I doubt there will be many campervans on the road to Emmaus. Jesus may have been constrained to stay with the disciples, but He was not bullied into it, even though the people *He* had to work with were often a nightmare.

Stay with us, Jesus. He appeared to be going on further (isn't He always?!). "Stay with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is now far spent. So He went in to stay with them." Like Abraham and Sarah, in the Book of Genesis, who practised hospitality at the oaks of Mamre,ⁱⁱⁱ the disciples at Emmaus discover that when they welcomed a stranger, they welcomed the Lord.

Stay with us, Jesus. Be our guest, for a time. "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." In all of these places, where Jesus stays, we find Him, and help Him, as He will in His time be a help to us.

Stay with us, Jesus.

Before we can do anything in the name of Jesus, and we do much in this Church for which we should be thankful, first Jesus must come and stay with us. He must be present. He must reside, before He moves on, and before He takes us with Him.

Perhaps He stays with us and is in a nearby seat here in Church. Perhaps He stays with us long enough for coffee after the service. This surprising Saviour, meeting us in this place and on the way. Coming to stay with us for a while. I read of a minister who was fond of saying, "God's other name is Surprise."^{iv}

Perhaps the surprise this morning, partly, is in the singing of two evening hymns. For me I miss our evening services, where, it feels to me, the space between heaven and earth is not so great: a thin place. I felt it during Holy Week where somehow, after the cares of the day, with defences down a little, I was maybe a little more open to letting God in, to speak, to nourish, and to stay. And for you?

So much of faith, like life, oscillates between those two realities of absence and presence. When there is absence – of a loved one, of hope, of work, of laughter, of love itself – that void is vast

and seems like it will never be filled again. When there is presence – there is welcome and warmth and enjoyment and contentment – and life seems worth the living again. We travel between the two, between absence and presence. It's a road along which we all journey, whatever our individual destination might be. But it's a road, like those two disciples on their way to Emmaus, that we need not travel on alone.

“Stay with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is now far spent. So He went in to stay with them.”

Stay with us, Jesus. Stay with us.

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

Amen

ⁱ Susan E Hylan, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2*, p351

ⁱⁱ Thomas Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, p97

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 18:1-15

^{iv} Roger A Paynter, *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke Vol 2* p355