

Jonathan Aitken Sermon, HTB Courtfield Gardens, Sunday 3 April 2016

Reading: Walk To Emmaus Luke 24 v.13-34

Some months ago I was in a supermarket when I was delightfully greeted with gushing enthusiasm by an unknown shopper.

This lady said some kind but rather OTT words and then asked:

“Can I please have your autograph?”

Naturally I was chuffed by this, but then as I took out my pen, the lady deflated me by saying:

“I can’t tell you how long I have admired you – Lord Mandelson”.

That anecdote is a small secular reminder that non-recognition is a common place occurrence. Most of us from time to time, especially as we get older, fail to put a name to a face – or we even blank a familiar acquaintance. Perhaps this mundane experience is one of the reasons why today’s Gospel Reading can strike a chord.

But that is a superficial reaction compared to the profound power and meaning of this story.

So let’s try and unpack it, not only looking back on the story’s past impact on the original Emmaus walkers, but also looking forward to its potential impact on our lives today.

Some of the power of the story comes from the sublime literary artistry with which Luke tells it. Perhaps I am particularly awed by this because I am a bit of a professional scribbler myself. So I know how challenging it can be to tell a tale of mystery and suspense.

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If you think of the great writers of short stories such as Hemingway, Maupassant, Chekov, or last year's winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Alice Munro – I believe that not one of them can touch the hem of Luke's garment in the divinely inspired way he relates The Walk to Emmaus.

His eye for detail in capturing the mood of the woebegone walkers is superb.

So is his portrayal of the mysterious unknown stranger.

Then there is the dramatic irony of letting us the readers know, as the two travellers do not, that what they describe as the destruction of their hopes is in fact the fulfilment of those hopes.

And finally, as the pressure builds in language and in narrative, the story reaches its extraordinary climax of supernatural revelation and personal transformation.

Wow! No wonder the Walk to Emmaus with its two pivotal themes of spiritual recognition and scriptural interpretation is regarded by many as the jewel in the crown of Gospel stories.

So let's dive into it, always keeping in mind its relevance to our own spiritual journeys.

The scene opens with Jesus coming alongside two downcast and profoundly unhappy people. How like him to do just that!

And how like us to be slow to understand his presence in our lives in the bad times when the going gets rough.

The two despondent travellers on the Road to Emmaus were followers of Jesus. Not a popular club to be members of in the days after his crucifixion, when the disciples were scattered and shattered fearing for their lives.

One of these followers is here called Cleopas. Some Biblical scholars such as Tom Wright think he might be the Clopas who is described in John 19:25 as standing at the foot of the cross with his wife.

So perhaps the Emmaus walkers were a married couple.

But all we really know about them is that they were two people devastated in their grief over the death of Jesus.

“We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel,” they said standing still on the road looking downwards into the abyss of their ruined dreams.

This was the moment when Jesus came alongside them on the road.

But the walkers were so overwhelmed by their own feelings of pain that they failed to recognise him.

So what did Jesus do? After coming alongside them, his second move was to stay with them for the entire walk.

It is a reminder that Jesus does not give up on us even when we give up on him. As in the famous story of "Footprints" he is with us at the worst of times, even if he seems invisible

His third move was to teach them.

As they walked towards Emmaus he expounded to them the Scriptures that we know as the Old Testament of the Bible.

Now the 7 mile walk is likely to have lasted for over two hours. So his exposition could not have been one of those quickie sermonette-lites some modern preachers tend to give us – superficially highlighting a verse here and a politically correct opinion there with the object of getting back to the vestry in under 10 minutes.

Although we are not told what Scriptures Jesus explained to them we can infer from Luke's words that he unfolded the whole story of how God manifested his love for his people ranging from the life of Moses to the book of Malachi.

His teaching would surely have included those passages from Isaiah and other Prophets who so clearly predicted the coming of the Lord in the role of a suffering servant.

Now the walkers to Emmaus did get some of the message even if they did not recognise the Messiah.

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“Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures” they said to each other later (Verse 32).

What this should tell us today is that the best way to get to know God is to immerse ourselves in his Scriptures.

All of us need the help of good teaching to understand the Bible. The Emmaus walkers were blessed to have the help of the greatest teacher – Jesus Himself.

Don’t forget that we too can have his help if we pray and ask him for it when we are starting a Bible reading, individually or in groups.

We have one great advantage over the walkers to Emmaus. We know, as they did not, that their companion and teacher was the Risen Christ.

Now we understand the power and meaning of his resurrection which we have been celebrating over Easter as a historic reality.

But for the early followers of Jesus, the resurrection was far, far beyond the horizons of their experiences and understanding.

Perhaps that’s one reason why the walkers to Emmaus were unable to recognise the risen Christ. And they were not the only ones.

In all the resurrection stories, such as Mary mistaking Jesus for the Gardener in Matthew 28 or the appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the Sea of Tiberius in John 21, non-recognition is the first impression in each encounter.

There are theories among theologians that the reason why none of Jesus's followers at the time of the first Easter could initially recognise him was because his body, emerging from the tomb, had been physically transformed.

But a more down to earth explanation is that then, as now, the real obstacles to recognising Jesus lie not in him but in ourselves.

All too often we have half-formed, half-false expectations of Jesus.

Recently I was giving an Alpha talk in Pentonville Prison and the question came up in the discussion session "What would you expect Jesus to do if he came into our lives?"

One bright spark had the answer on the tip of his tongue.

"He would get me parole next Wednesday!"

That's the sort of attitude shared by many. Too often, even committed Christians think of Jesus as the source of holy electrical energy who will provide instant solutions to our problems in the way we want.

The walkers to Emmaus had something of the same mind-set.

They expected Christ to come in glory and to redeem Israel from suffering.

They could not get their heads round the idea that he might redeem Israel through suffering.

Yet although they didn't fully understand it, the Emmaus couple by the end of the walk knew that they wanted more of Jesus's message. They had that common experience of hearing Biblical teaching and feeling a strong sense of spiritual hunger to know more.

Which brings us to the next scene when the walkers approached Emmaus.

So far Jesus has come alongside them.

He has walked the whole way with them.

He has taught them the Scriptures. What next?

Here there is a subtle pause of anti-climax in Luke's narrative. Jesus simply waits. He waits to be invited in.

How typical of him. Jesus never forces himself into anyone's life. He waits for us to exercise our choice, our free will.

When I did my first Alpha Course, 19 years ago now, I was entranced, as many others have been, at the imagery highlighted in the Course of the Holman Hunt painting *The Light of the World* depicting Revelation 3: 17.

"Behold I stand at the door and knock" says Jesus in that verse.

We can be sure that his knock was not a threatening thump of a bailiff seeking to restrain someone's goods. Or the authoritarian banging of a policeman pursuing a suspect.

No. Jesus calls us gently – as Revelations 3:17 puts it “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sup with him and he with me”.

And that is more or less what happened towards to the end of the Walk to Emmaus. Jesus knocked at the door of his companion’s hearts with his teaching of the Scriptures. Then he hung back and waited. He acted as though he might be going further.

The walkers did not want to let him go. So they made the next move (Verse 29). They urged him strongly; “Stay with us for it is nearly evening”.

Now we come to the final move by Jesus.

He came in, sat down with his companions at the meal table and assuming the role of host (Verse 30-31) “He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight”.

This is the supernatural summit of the story. The moment of recognition of the risen Christ.

How and why did it happen? Why hadn’t it happened on the walk? Can it still happen to us today? There are deep mysteries here.

The recognition at the house in Emmaus was not triggered because Cleopas and his companion saw in the breaking of the bread a repetition of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. That's because Cleopas was not present at the Last Supper, so obviously he could have had no memory of it to rekindle.

Therefore this was not a Eucharistic breaking of the bread. It was just the ordinary start of an ordinary meal in an ordinary house when an ordinary loaf was being divided.

Today Jesus still comes to us through ordinary people through ordinary circumstances.

Often he comes at moments when we are downcast looking at the ground rather than looking up at him.

But there are perhaps preconditions to recognising him and they are all mentioned here in the story.

First we have to walk with Jesus and spend time with him before recognition dawns.

Secondly, we have to listen and study his Scriptures, his word.

Thirdly, we have to invite him in to our hearts and lives.

Then, and perhaps only then, will Jesus reveal himself to us. How he does it is a mystery. Maybe it will be a by a movement of the Holy Spirit at the end of an HTB service.

Maybe it will happen with the help of a Godly person with whom we are praying or who tries to give us a message from Jesus.

But we will know when we have recognised Jesus. That's because we will start to think and behave differently. And this is what happened to the Emmaus walkers. At the beginning of the walk they are devastated people who thought that Jesus of Nazareth had failed to redeem Israel.

But by the end of the story, after the recognition they are energised, enthused, transformed people.

Even though it was well after dark, they got up, returned at once to Jerusalem making another seven mile walk that same evening.

They wanted to share the good news with the 11 disciples, and to bear witness to their encounter with the Risen Christ.

* * *

As you can see the First century story of the walk to Emmaus contains 21st century sign posts for our own walks with the Lord guiding us on how we might today recognise him and his message.

Let me conclude by sharing one such contemporary experience.

I started this talk with a light hearted anecdote about non-recognition.

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Now I will finish with a more serious anecdote on the same theme but with a deeper, happier ending. It involves a Godly messenger many of you know quite well.

17 years ago in June 1999 just after I had been sentenced to 18 months at the Old Bailey my first visitor in prison was Nicky Gumbel.

Somehow or other he had pulled a string through the prison chaplaincy network and had been allowed in to see me on my third day of my sentence.

I had no idea he was coming and for an amusing reason I literally did not recognise him for a couple of seconds after he came into the room.

That was because the decidedly old school chaplain at HMP Belmarsh imposed a firm rule that any clergy coming into his prison had to wear formal, clerical dress.

So in obedience to this rule Nicky was uncharacteristically wearing an old fashioned Barchester Towers kit, stiff dog collar, dark suit, and the clerical grey bib and tucker of a Victorian parson.

As I had never before seen him in anything other than jeans and an open neck shirt teaching Alpha you can understand why I had a brief moment of physical non-recognition.

But more seriously I regret to say that my spiritual non-recognition of Nicky's message lasted much longer.

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To give the background here, I should explain that at this moment I was every bit as downcast and dejected as those Emmaus walkers.

I was still thrashing around in the depths of a process that I sometimes describe as Defeat, Disgrace, Divorce, Bankruptcy and Jail – a royal flush of crises by anybody's standards with the added torment of being public enemy No 1 in the media.

So when Nicky started to deliver an upbeat Christian message to me as a newly jailed prisoner, I am sorry to say that I brushed it aside as if it were an artificial attempt by the Reverend J C Flannel of Private Eye to cheer me up.

This was because the gist of what Nicky was saying was along the lines of "Do you realise that God may have given you a great opportunity. You could be a witness for Jesus. You could give talks. You could preach in churches".

Well I thought that the Revd J.C. Flannel-Gumbel was talking complete pie in the sky.

So I replied to him rather sharply, perhaps in the manner that Emmaus walkers at first responded to Jesus.

"Are you the only person in Britain who doesn't realise how disgraced and ruined I am." I more or less said to him.

"Who on earth would ever want to listen to me?"

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Well, the months rolled by. And after doing a lot of praying and Bible study both at HMP Belmarsh and then at HMP Wycliffe Hall, recognition slowly dawned. I invited Jesus into my life. And he has stayed there. So, I guess that's why I am preaching here on this first Sunday after Easter. Nicky's message was right. It just took me far too long to recognise it.

My final thought is that each and every one of us can have, as I did our modern equivalent of the Walk to Emmaus.

We may well be slow to recognise Jesus even when he or his messenger comes alongside us.

We may need to pray for the gifts of spiritual discipline and spiritual sight so that God might open our eyes to see the presence of our Lord and Saviour in our daily lives.

So let us pray that we will all come to recognise Jesus, saying with burning hearts and joyful voices this Eastertide.

"He is risen indeed, Alleluia".

Amen