

Easter 3 2023

Luke 24.13-35

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight (Luke 24.30-31)

The Road to Emmaus is one of the most enduring themes and images of Christian history. It provides one of the basic scriptural warrants for the centrality of the eucharist in Christian life and worship – it is in the breaking of the bread that the disciples recognise the risen Lord. The revelatory meal has inspired some of the greatest Christian painters – Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Velazquez spring to mind. And the Emmaus Road also lurks behind some of our best-known literature, or rather than lurks behind, I should probably say walks alongside, since allusion to companionship on the road is so often rooted in this story.

A rather explicit example comes in a celebrated poem published just a few months more than a hundred years ago, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?

This theme of walking alongside, or being alongside, has given rise to an entire discourse in the multifaceted world of pastoral care. Many people in caring situations will speak of walking alongside someone on their journey without any awareness at all that this is a reference to the gospel of Luke, and many who engage in what is often called pastoral theology have taken the Road to Emmaus as an absolute paradigm of Christian ministry. The acts of coming alongside someone in their need, comforting grief with the love of God, and consummating faith in table fellowship give us a picture of the church in miniature.

Certainly for Christian believers the story is generally taken as a source of comfort. In our blindness, our bewilderment and our disappointment, God himself is with us – unknown but present, walking with us, leading us into truth so that we are enabled to grasp the reality of his risen life, the life we share in the sacraments.

This reading must be, in part, what Luke had in mind by making this his distinctive version of Jesus' resurrection appearances. And because we

are dealing with Luke, there is an interesting parallel to be drawn – as so often – with an event in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts chapter 8, the apostle Philip is called by an angel to go to the desert road leading south from Jerusalem to Gaza. There he finds an important Ethiopian official, and he joins his journey, guiding his reading of the prophet Isaiah until the foreign dignitary comes to realise that the sheep led dumb to the slaughter is Jesus the crucified Christ. Coming upon some water, the Ethiopian suggests that he be baptised. And when they come up out of the water, Philip is instantly taken from his presence by the Spirit: the Ethiopian sees him no more but is in no way troubled – he goes on his way rejoicing.

The two disciples in the Emmaus road story have a very similar experience. They are walking together, and Jesus comes and joins them, the stranger who walks alongside. Gradually he unfolds to them the truths of the scriptures which they wish to understand but cannot without help. When they come to their destination, he makes to go further, but at their instigation – not his – he remains and enjoys table fellowship with them. For Philip and the Ethiopian, the sacrament is baptism, for Jesus and these two disciples it is the eucharist, but in both cases when the sacramental act is celebrated the stranger who speaks the truth is both revealed and removed. Jesus takes the bread, blesses

it, breaks it and gives it to them, and their eyes are opened, and they recognise him, and instantly he vanishes, just as Philip will when the Ethiopian comes up from the water.

The Acts story is certainly a parallel, but the Emmaus story is the paradigm, the basic account of the risen Lord's presence with the church. And given that this is the case, we might ask ourselves why this story is a comfort to us, rather than a challenge. When during Eastertide we work our way through the various stories of the risen Christ, it is natural to wish ourselves into the position of the apostles, to want to be those who were the real witnesses to the resurrection of Christ. If we could greet Jesus in the upper room and, with Thomas, see the marks of the nails; or if with Mary Magdalen we could find the tomb empty and turn to be confronted by Jesus himself, then perhaps faith would not be a problem. The evangelists, however, suggest otherwise. Thomas's statement of faith is made because he places himself within the wounds of Jesus; Mary Magdalen's recognition of Jesus takes place because he calls her by name. It is not the simple act of seeing which is significant here, it is the act of perceiving, of understanding that we are in the presence of the risen Christ.

The story of the Road to Emmaus dramatically emphasises this point. The disciples on the road already have the evidence, the testimony of the resurrection. They have everything which our concern for facts would like to have. But still they do not recognise the one who walks beside them. The records and reports of the eyewitnesses are all very well, but they are far from enough.

We are left, then, with a striking anomaly. To be sure of the presence of Jesus, is to ensure his physical absence. Having walked alongside the disciples, having brought them through a journey of faith and recognition, Jesus makes his presence known to them for sure by sharing in the Eucharistic meal. At his act of taking, blessing, breaking and giving the bread, the disciples eyes are opened. And as soon as their eyes are opened and they have arrived at the truth, Jesus disappears from their presence. It is as if the gospel is drawing our attention to the limitations of physical evidence, as if we are intended to have grown out of a childish need for verification so that we can learn where truth really lies – not the simple acts of sensory perception, but in the enlightenment, the illumination which is the work of the divine, that which is the ultimate truth.

When Jesus instructs the disciples on the road, he upbraids them for not understanding that the messiah should suffer before entering into his glory. That glory, then, has been attained by the cross. The risen Christ is already in possession of his glory, the eternal life of love at the right hand of the Father. The disciples, being given the temporary evidence of sight, are being led beyond that transient truth claim to something far more substantial – fellowship with God himself, the life of the Son in all his glory. Once the reality of Christ’s risen presence in the Eucharistic meal is clear, the physical presence of the Son is no longer necessary. He disappears, and they go their way rejoicing, for they have been united with his risen life. It is because we are truly united with that which is truly God, that verification is no longer necessary. The evidence of our eyes will only take us so far.