

Third Sunday of Easter 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Emmaus

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

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?

The vivid ambiguity of the journey to Emmaus was meat and drink to T.S. Eliot and to the uncertainty which pervades *The Waste Land*. The concept of journey has, from the earliest times of the church, been an image of the Christian life, and the power of pilgrimage in later Christianity is, in part, a result of the almost relentless emphasis on following and walking in the way which we find in the New Testament. But the road to Emmaus presents a journey rather different from those we encounter in the rest of the gospels. The two disciples are pilgrims, to be sure, but they are pilgrims after the event, they are travellers

coming from the Holy City once the festival has ended. They are travelling not towards but away from the focus of their attention.

Journeys and destinations are particularly frequent and significant in Luke's gospel, and its companion, the Acts of the Apostles. Even the angel Gabriel is described with an itinerary - he is sent from heaven to a town called Nazareth in Galilee. We read of Mary journeying to the hill country of Judah to see Elizabeth, of the holy family journeying from Nazareth to Bethlehem for Jesus birth. Next we have the two journeys to and from Jerusalem, first for Jesus presentation in the temple, then when he is twelve years old and stays behind to go about his father's business. And it is not simply the narrative of Jesus life and ministry which presents these journeys, but also Jesus himself in the stories he tells - the man who falls among thieves is on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and is helped by a travelling Samaritan. The prodigal son takes his journey into the far country, and when he returns is greeted by his father running out whilst the son is still on the road. In the Acts of the Apostles many journeys by many people, by land and by sea, are described, central among them the journey from Jerusalem to Damascus which sees the conversion of Paul.

The most important journey Luke describes is, however, the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, his arrest, condemnation, and execution. Luke somewhat artificially envelops about half of his gospel within this journey, such that Jesus is described taking the most circuitous routes imaginable, the equivalent of travelling from Oxford to Cambridge via Brighton. The reason is clear enough - Luke is anxious that the whole of Jesus ministry should be seen as leading up to the events of the passion. But here we are this morning, after the events of the Passover, and we find that Luke has not finished with his journeys. As the two disciples walk away from Jerusalem, Jesus himself comes and walks alongside them, but their eyes are kept from recognising him. He comes up from behind, catches up with them as they walk, but they simply and naturally assume that he is just another pilgrim, just another person walking away in puzzlement or, like them, in sorrow and grief.

Who is the third who walks always beside you? When the two disciples reach Emmaus, their companion makes to go on. His journey, it seems, is not completed. But they prevail upon him to stay with them, and he does. Having opened up the scriptures to them as they walked along the road, now he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognised him. Luke is a master storyteller, but he is not subtle. The disciples know the risen Christ in

the breaking of the bread. The evidence of the women who went to the tomb was not enough for them – they say so themselves. Their own reading of the scriptures is insufficient – Jesus has to unpack the law and prophets as they walk together. Only in the breaking of the bread, only in the Eucharistic action, do they finally come to recognition. Having led their blindness along the road, he now opens their eyes to his presence with them.

And then? And then, he disappears. His companionship, his dwelling in and with the community that is the church, is not a matter of bodily resuscitation. It is the risen presence, the transformation of humanity, which is now the gift and the possession of all with whom he walks. 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.

But that's not quite the end of the story, for the disciples respond to this journey of faith with one more journey. They began the story as pilgrims in reverse, walking away from the events of Holy Week, leaving the city of Jerusalem and seeking to dwell elsewhere. Their reaction on

recognising the presence of the risen Christ is quite the opposite. They return to Jerusalem, they take themselves back to the place where the gospel began, to the place of the temple, the place of the divine presence, precisely so that they can journey outwards not in disappointment and grief, but in triumph and in hope, as they symbolically roll out the presence of God, from the temple in Jerusalem to all the nations of the world as they preach the truth of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Christian pilgrimage becomes, then, not a walking towards so much as a walking with, a knowledge that the presence of God does not dwell in temples made with hands, but that in the power of the Spirit the risen Christ is present in the life of the church, in the celebration of the sacraments, and in the ordinary existence, the every single footstep, of you and of me and all those who are baptised into his death and resurrection.

Who is the third who walks always beside you? The story of the road to Emmaus is not a story of absence. Jesus vanishes from the disciples' sight only because their physical perception is being replaced with a fuller, a truer recognition of the truth which transcends the limitations of forensic verification. It is as if Luke is challenging his readers and hearers with the presence of Christ himself, demanding that we respond to his claim that the risen Christ is somehow more fully present in the

life of the church, in the unfolding of the scriptures, in the celebration of the sacraments, than he was in the appearances of that first Easter day.

The journey of recognition, the realisation of our Easter proclamation, is no ordinary travel from here to there, not a finished story with a beginning and an end. It is the pilgrimage of faith which is the life of every Christian, the acknowledgement in worship and love, in sacrament and service, of the Christ who lives in and with each one of us. Who is the third who walks always beside you?