

Easter 3 2020

Luke 24.13-35

The road to Emmaus

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The gospel of Luke is a book of journeys. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to Nazareth, Mary journeys into the hill country of Judea to greet Elizabeth, the holy family make their way to Bethlehem, Jesus makes his way out into the wilderness. All of those journeys take place in the first few chapters of the gospel, but the majority of the book is dominated by a single journey, one in which Jesus and his disciples make their way to Jerusalem. This lengthy trek takes up more than half the text of the gospel itself, and within it we encounter several journeys within the journey: the man who is rescued by the Good Samaritan is attacked while on the road; the prodigal son takes his journey into the far country before returning to the bosom of his father, the lepers who are cleansed at the word of Jesus receive their blessing by being sent to show themselves

to the priests. There are more examples in Luke's gospel, and many more in its companion book, the Acts of the Apostles.

Much could be said about travels and journeying as a metaphor for Christian discipleship. From the very earliest times, Christians have used the image of "the way" to describe their life of faith. The story of the road to Emmaus is probably as well-known an example of this image as any. As the two disciples walk away from Jerusalem, following the events of the crucifixion, 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.

When the disciples reach the village of 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. 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.

This celebrated travel narrative, however, comes to us today at a time when the idea of journeying is unexpectedly difficult. Whereas last Sunday's resurrection narrative from John seemed tailor made for our current crisis – the disciples were gathered together inside, behind locked doors, and Jesus came

and appeared in the midst of them – this week we find ourselves not so much relating to a familiar story of basic human activity, as having to resist the temptation gloomily to wonder if we will ever be able to journey again. Such a view is unnecessarily lugubrious, of course. Indeed, one good thing to have come out of the last few weeks is the rediscovery of walking which many have enjoyed, and in that rediscovery the further encounter with familiar places which are renewed by the absence of others – my daily walks with my son around the sunny stillness of Worcester College have provoked the most theological of clichés, because they have been a revelation.

It is absence which requires our attention as we struggle to place ourselves on that road to Emmaus. Our own absence from the metaphor need not keep us from the reality. Though we are not currently able to journey, we are no less those disciples of Jesus than if we were setting off on pilgrimage. But more important is the absence of Jesus himself. In a manner rather

similar to the narratives of the first Easter morning, the climax of this story turns out to be nothing. When the disciples recognise their Lord in the breaking of the bread, he disappears. Just as with the empty tomb, their faith, their realization, is greeted not by presence but by absence. The physical presence of Jesus was necessary to coax their faith from blindness to perception, but once that perception is achieved, physical presence is no more.

There is an interesting parallel to this absence elsewhere in the writings of Luke. In Acts chapter 8, we read of the apostle Philip meeting the Ethiopian official and instructing him as to the correct interpretation of the suffering servant passage in Isaiah. Being brought to faith by Philip, the foreigner asks to be baptised, and as soon as they emerge from the water, Philip disappears (we are told that “the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip, and the eunuch saw him now more”). In both cases, we see the dominical sacraments – baptism and eucharist – as the

gifts of God to the believer, but also as the sign of that divine presence which is now transformed from the purely physical to the limitless omnipresence of the God who is not confined by people or by place.

In the story of the Emmaus road, Jesus' absence becomes his true presence. That literal absence serves to instruct his disciples about the truth of his resurrection. 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.

And so there is, perhaps, a little comfort in the enforced absence which we are all currently required to undergo. Absence is not a good thing for us, far from it. Absence from friends and family, absence from the gathered body that is the Church, absence from the sacraments which feed our Christian lives: none of these is desirable. But the absences of Christ in the gospel narratives – the emptiness of the tomb, the disappearance of the Lord in the breaking of bread - are a telling reminder that the language of limitation makes no sense when we are speaking of the presence of God. There is no God who is not God with us. We will return to our Eucharistic fellowship, we will worship together again, and the moment of our return will rightly be a cause for rejoicing. But God will not be any more present in our lives at that moment than is the case at every moment now. The truth of the divine presence is a truth far beyond the restrictions of time and space.