



Third Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



23 April 2023

READINGS

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Psalm 116: 1-4, 11-18; 1 Peter 1: 17-23; Luke 24: 13-35

Road to Emmaus

I think many of us can identify with the Emmaus Road appearance of Jesus. How often are we so wrapped up in what has happened to us, we can't see what is right in front. But maybe the disciples weren't to blame. We have to realise that Jesus, the Son of God, loves his disciples and works within the psychology that God created which underlines all reactions of human nature. This Emmaus Road experience is one such example.

The crucifixion was a highly traumatic event. Even in an era when violence was endemic and human rights were an unknown concept, the crucifixion was designed to be the worst possible death the Romans could devise. The suffering of the victims was the aim, and it was probably what the ancestors of horror movie aficionados watched with fascination. For everyone else, it was terrifying.

But like most of us, the disciples had probably compartmentalized their lives. We know about the horrors of life in prison, of refugee camps, of efforts to survive in war-torn areas the violence in our schools and in many of the families in our land, and even in the kindly civilized world of hospice, we come face to face with a reality we don't often encounter, and don't like to think about. They knew about crucifixion, but it wasn't part of their experience, and they were expecting the messiah to defeat the Romans in a religious, clinical, safe way, probably. Who knows what pictures went through their minds? A teenage version of King David the hero? Whatever they thought, the stark reality and the horror of their dearly loved and loving leader, being put through all that horror, would have had a profound psychological effect on all of them.

Those of us who have been through a serious car accident. Or have been held up in our homes or on the street or in our cars, will know something of post-traumatic stress. I think it's fair to say that Cleopas and his companions were suffering from this. Perhaps this is why Jesus who joined them was not recognised by them. Possibly they were too deep in their shock and sorrow to recognise him, or Jesus knew the necessity of their healing – probably both. There are many and varied schools of thought as to how to help someone manage trauma, and as science continues to develop, there will be many more. But for now, let's see how Jesus handled these people.

Lets go through it, step by step. Firstly, they were walking. Physical exercise is always helpful in any sort of psychological issue – that much has been documented frequently. So they were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus – either three miles or seven miles, depending on which authority you follow. Either way, it's a decent walk. Then they were talking over the events of the crucifixion, and it is at this

point that Jesus joined them. Jesus appeared not to know what had happened, which surprised the walkers, but it gave them the chance to tell their story and their experiences of it without being clouded by any input from the listener. The resurrection seemed to be an added complication – maybe they are worried about the mental hysteria of their fellow-disciples, maybe they are worried about Roman interference of the burial. Whatever they thought, it seems to have made things more difficult to process, and they seemed to be mightily confused. In telling their story, all these issues were brought into the open.

So when they had told their story, Jesus responded. By going into Biblical history, the prophets and everything God has done for God's people throughout the ages, he re-frames their story. By seeing the events of the past days within the context of the whole of the history of the Jewish people, and their Messiah, suddenly the horror becomes destiny, and they realise that what had happened was within God's plan all along. And they really get it when, after inviting Jesus to stay the night, he takes over the supper and breaks the bread. Suddenly they recognise him, but then he disappears.

So apart from a very good example of trauma debriefing, how does this story grow our faith and bring us closer to our Saviour?

Firstly, it shows that God does not necessarily work in ways that we can predict. No sensible project manager would factor in a crucifixion into his or her plan. How on earth that makes the world a better place, only God knows. And the suffering of Jesus means that any misfortune or suffering, deserved or undeserved, is not beyond God's reach, and everything can result in a resurrection. Having faith does not mean, not being sad, angry, despairing, or frustrated. It does mean clinging to the fact that God will support us, will be there for us, probably as unseen as he was on the Emmaus Road. But he will not carry us beyond what we need. He will use anything to teach us the ways of Jesus, and then set us on the right path to continue, even if we are less aware of his being alongside us.

Secondly, it shows us that we can rely on the presence of Christ when we need it most. However dark the path before us, we are never alone. Christ is with us and he not only supports us, but teaches us too. Every experience leaves us having learnt something valuable, and more able to continue living our lives in God's strength.

Thirdly, and here is the message of the breaking of the bread, we have a sign of God's presence. We believe that Jesus is always with us, but being humans, we can alter beliefs and add our own theology to suit ourselves. Jesus knew this, and he gave us a meal to remember him by. It is significant that he disappeared from sight when he broke the bread. His bodily presence existing in the bread and the wine gradually takes over. We believe that God is present in the bread and wine of our communion service, but we eat it in community with other Christians, and we build up to it with an accepted liturgy, and after the reading of scripture. This is to stop us hi-jacking God to serve ourselves in our personal whims and fancies. It grounds us along with other people who have different needs and different strengths, and constantly reminds us we are a covenant people, who are informed not only by the Hebrew scriptures, as Jesus and the disciples were, but by the words of Jesus himself, and by the words of those apostles and disciples who wrote our New Testament scriptures and whose works have guided us for centuries. We belong to God, not the other way around. The Eucharist reminds us of this

We who live in this land know that with the high levels of crime and dysfunctionality in all areas, most of our citizens – particularly the children – are highly traumatized. How do we, as Christians break this backlog? Happy family life in South Africa is a rarity, and most children grow up in an environment of cruelty,

violence and dishonesty. How do we walk alongside these children – be their Emmaus Road companion until they can get to a point of depending on their own strengths to navigate their way through life? And does Jesus make sense to them? What is the meaning of the Resurrection to a 7 or 8 year old child is trying to survive abuses they shouldn't even know about at this age? As Christians, it is mandatory that we play a much more active part in clearing up our country and being there for all our abused, neglected children.

We are all on some sort of Road. We are all trying to get somewhere, and we can all be assured, Jesus is with us. Any journey is enriched by his presence, and he longs for us to see him and respond to his leadership. We can all remember experiences of Jesus' presence with us, and we can continue, knowing he will never leave us. But make no bones about it, to get our country back on track is going to take a lot of effort, much sacrifice on our part, and the patience to keep at it for a very long time. More than ever, we will have to remember Jesus will walk alongside us until the end of the road.