

The Third Sunday of Easter

Collect: Almighty Father, who in your great mercy gladdened the disciples with the sight of the risen Lord: give us such knowledge of his presence with us, that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life and serve you continually in righteousness and truth; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35. Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.¹⁷ And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'¹⁹ He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'²⁵ Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sermon on the Passage by Dr Sophy Jubb

It's about seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. That's not quite as far as it is from here to Oundle; a journey which many of us make every day in normal times, though probably not now. In the ancient world, though, travelling that distance would take several hours, over rough roads with bandits likely to be lying in wait, especially if you were rash enough to travel after dusk. Given the number of puddles and pot holes that have appeared during the last winter, perhaps anyone acquainted with the roads of rural Northamptonshire can understand something of what it's like to travel over rough roads; but fortunately for us badgers with no road sense are about as close as we get to bandits.

Luke is the only Gospel writer who includes the story of the Emmaus Road. He tells it as part of his narrative of the events of the first Easter, the first day of the new post-Resurrection world, in which he reveals the joyful miracle of Jesus' rising from the dead. There's a lot going on in this passage, and a range of emotions from the deepest despair to immense joy.

Cleopas and his unnamed companion were in the depths of despair when they left Jerusalem. We don't know why they went, or when they set out, but it was 'nearly evening' when they arrived. They'd dared to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, sent to redeem the Jewish people; but all their hopes had been dashed by his arrest and crucifixion. They'd got to that state of mental exhaustion where all they can do is talk round and round in circles, endlessly discussing what had happened. When a stranger appears, they cannot believe that events so central to their lives can be unknown to anyone in the whole city of Jerusalem. This isn't as unreasonable as it might appear; crucifixions were deliberately public events, designed to act as punishment and deterrent in one, so pretty much everyone in Jerusalem on that fateful day will have known what was going on.

The stranger, unrecognised by them but Luke tells us immediately that it's really Jesus, meets them where they are on their journey to Emmaus and on their journey of faith. He is willing to look foolishly ignorant of current events in order to enable their faith, because he knows that they need to talk and to listen. When Cleopas and his companion tell Jesus what has happened, they reveal unwittingly that they could have saved themselves immense heartache if only they had believed the women who were first to see the risen Jesus. When we silence women's voices we silence an aspect of the voice of God, and make things unnecessarily difficult for ourselves as Christians. I'd like to think that Jesus pointed this out to them!

What follows is a lesson in Jewish history and scripture, where it turns out that Cleopas and his friend are the foolish ones, who didn't read the signs. Yet still, they don't recognise Jesus.

When the three of them arrive in Emmaus, dusk is falling. As I've said, it wasn't safe to travel at night in the ancient world. Furthermore, hospitality rules were very strict. Cleopas and his friend would have been guilty of a serious breach of etiquette if they'd allowed the stranger to continue on his own while they went into the inn. So they invited him in, and they had supper together.

There's an enormous and beautiful tapestry in the Vatican which shows a Renaissance idea of that meal. The table is set under a vine; a dog and a cat are in the foreground discussing the scraps; wine is cooling in a large ice bucket. At the table, Jesus is in the centre, and has just broken the bread. His left hand is passing a piece of bread to Cleopas, and his right is raised in blessing. Cleopas and his friend sit one on each side of him and have clearly just realised who he is. The delighted astonishment is evident in their faces and body language.

As usual with post-Resurrection appearances, Jesus didn't hang around once Cleopas and his friend had got the point. He disappeared, leaving them to wonder how they could ever not have recognised him. Their next thought was 'we must tell the others!' The only way they could do that was to abandon whatever had taken them to Emmaus, and dash headlong back to Jerusalem. They ignored the perils of travelling at night, and their fatigue from their earlier journey. This good news must be shared. We can imagine them going as fast as they could, crashing in at the door of the room where they knew the disciples would be gathered, bursting with their extraordinary news... but their thunder has been stolen. Jesus has appeared to Simon. Everybody knows the truth. It doesn't matter, though. Everyone can now rejoice together, and I like to think that there was a feast that night.

However much we stumble, however unsure we are as we travel through life, wherever we are on our journey of faith, Jesus will meet us in the breaking of bread if we will only let him, and meeting him has the power to transform us.

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