

*The Emmaus Encounter*

Something that makes the story we read this morning from Luke's Gospel so compelling is that it is shrouded in mystery. It's baffling in so many ways and maybe that is part of its power. To begin with there is the mystery of who these two people are who are walking the road to Emmaus late in the day. Why doesn't Luke introduce them properly? We're told that one is called Cleopas, but we don't know anyone by that name, and the other is anonymous – no name, no indication even if it's a man or a woman. We do not recognise them, and what is even more mysterious, is that neither of them recognise Jesus when he joins them. Suddenly he is with them and he doesn't seem to know what has been happening in Jerusalem in the past few days and they have to tell him. And then this stranger expounds the Scriptures, starting from Moses and the prophets, explaining why it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer. And would you not have just loved to have been able to eavesdrop on that peripatetic Bible Study along the Emmaus Road? Would you not have just loved to have listened to the eternal Word of God, who was with God at the beginning and through whom all things came to be, expounding the written Word of God as found in the Hebrew Scriptures. How I would have loved to hear Jesus explain why he had to die and what it accomplished! No wonder we are told that looking back, in retrospect, the disciples were aware that their hearts burned within them as they listened. But how come they did not know that this was Jesus? Did they not recognise him or his voice, his accent, his inflexions? Had they not heard some of that teaching before?

It's strange, and Luke only deepens the mystery when he tells us in verse 15 that 'their eyes were kept from recognising him.' Not just that they didn't recognise him, but that they were prevented from recognising him. What's that all about? There is a sense almost of their eyes being controlled, against their will, so that they could not register what was before them. It's as if they are blinded to the reality of Jesus. So how come? Well, I guess you could say that that is our condition as human beings - blindness. That's our problem: we are incapable of recognising the truth of God when it is staring us in the face. Indeed, that's why these two disciples are mourning in the first place, because our total failure to recognise God's grace and truth, even when he becomes flesh and stands in our midst, was what caused Jesus' execution. What

I don't understand, however, is why Jesus' didn't just open their eyes so they could see. Why didn't he run up to them as they walked along the road, and say, 'Look! It's me! I'm back! I'm alive! God raised me up! Great to see you again!' But, no. Jesus seems to hold back, to conceal himself. He is reticent. And of course what is really infuriating is that just at the moment when the disciples do finally recognise him, just as we're told in verse 31 that their eyes were opened, Jesus disappears. He vanished from their sight!

All this is very troubling, for the Jesus presented here is so elusive. We can so easily miss him. Not only are we poorly equipped for seeing him but he does not seem readily inclined to make himself known to us anyway. We so easily fail to recognise him and even when we do, he slips our grasp. Just when you think you've got him, he's gone. And if this is the case, then it becomes very important for us to have some idea where we should look for him. If we're that blind and he's that slippery then it's vital for us to have some pointers, some clues as to where we might find him. After all, Lord, we are your people and sometimes we struggle to believe and we would really, really like to connect with you, to touch base with you. We would really like to be around, if possible, when you show up. We would hate to miss you. And we're blind and dull and you're elusive and reticent and it would therefore be helpful to get a handle on where you hang out. Maybe you could give us just some indication as to where we are likely to find you. And here I would suggest to you that this passage offer us three clues to meeting with the risen Lord, three rendezvous points with the Christ of the Emmaus Road.

The first place is worship: where we gather together to worship God. And with this in mind I would like you to notice what we might call the liturgical shape to this passage. The story reflects the ingredients, the components of a service of worship. Think about it. First, Jesus joins these two disciples on the road. Then they soon find themselves listening to the Scriptures being expounded. They hear the Word spoken. And then in no time they are breaking bread as Jesus, the guest, becomes the host, and he is revealed to them in that action. And then these disciples find themselves heading back to Jerusalem, back from whence they came, to tell others. And that is the pattern of our worship. Jesus comes amongst us where two or more are gathered, and we listen to the Scriptures being opened up to us, and then we gather at table for the breaking of bread, and then we are sent back to the world to bear witness. That's the liturgical shape to this narrative and it is telling us

through a story that we meet Jesus in worship. That's the primary place of encounter.

There is however a second rendezvous taking place here. We realise of course that these two disciples on the road are in a bad way. Their mood is as dark as the evening sky that descends upon them as they walk. They are in a state of total dejection and despair. As they explain to the stranger who draws alongside them, they are in shock at the loss of the one who they had hoped would be the liberator of Israel. And the road to Emmaus is therefore a road of loss and of grief, of disillusionment and of doubt. It is a road travelled by those who have cause to question God, and indeed who may have cause to question if there even is a God. It is a road walked by people who feel that the sun is setting on their faith, or their hopes, or indeed on their lives. This road is set in nowhere land. We actually know nothing about any place called Emmaus, only that it was seven miles away from Jerusalem, and if Jerusalem is the place associated with the temple and the presence of God, then the road to Emmaus leads away from it. It's the road associated with the words spoken by Cleopas, 'but we had been hoping that...' In other words it's a road paved with broken hopes and failed dreams. And there are many of you who know that sad road only too well for you have walked it, and you have felt the darkness closing in around you. And, yet, mysteriously, this is a road where Christ joins us. Of course we may not recognise him at the time. We are in no state to. Our eyes are blinded by grief and doubt and dejection. And it may only be in retrospect that we can discern his presence in that lonely place, and it may only be in looking back that we can testify that broken hearts became burning hearts. But nevertheless, this is a road that Christ walks with us.

And so in worship and in desolation the risen Lord draws alongside us. But there is one further thing that must be said. In verse 28 of our passage we read, 'As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is now evening and the day is now nearly over.'" Here the disciples implore this stranger to stay with them and this is an offer of hospitality, an invitation to Jesus to remain in their company. And what motivates the disciples is concern for this person. To be on your own as night was falling was to leave yourself very vulnerable. You were at risk of robbery and injury and so it is out of compassion for this stranger that the disciples invite him to stay with them. And just imagine if they hadn't. Imagine if they

had just said goodbye and left him to go on his way. What would have happened? Well it's clear what wouldn't have happened. The disciples would never have had that moment when the Lord broke the bread and revealed his presence to them. Jesus would not have been there and they would have missed him. They would never have recognised him. You see it seems that there are times when Jesus would walk ahead without us, times when he would leave us behind. And sometimes therefore our meeting with him is dependent upon us. It's our responsibility to make it happen. And the key is our openness to the other person in need. That is crucial. Where hospitality and welcome are offered to the vulnerable, where practical concern is expressed to our fellow traveller, when our hearts reach out to those around us, there Christ shows up. And it might be through caring for the homeless, or it might be in reaching out to refugees, but this is where we take responsibility for making an encounter with the risen, elusive Jesus at least possible. We can't make it happen but we can try to create the condition where it might.

So that's the Emmaus encounter with the risen Lord. But what if we move from Emmaus to the ERC, from Emmaus to this English Reformed Church. Here we are in a world where Jesus remains as hidden and unrecognisable as ever. Here we are in a world that is as blind to God's truth as it's always been. And that is compounded by the fact that the Church so often obscures Jesus and makes him utterly unrecognisable. And in this secular age in which we live Jesus becomes more and more remote and unknown. In such a world, how are people to see and recognise him? Well, is this not our mission as a church: simply to make Jesus visible? Is this not our calling, to be a place where people might just encounter Jesus and where their eyes might be opened to recognise him? And how do we do this?

Well, the Emmaus Road was one on which Jesus met people in worship. It was one on which Jesus met people in darkness and loss. It was one on which Jesus met people who reached out to the stranger in friendship. Let us pray that the Emmaus Road might run right through this English Reformed Church. Amen.