

Luke 24:13-35

You really have to feel some sympathy for the followers of Jesus. Let's just say that they have to get accustomed to the unpredictable, and today's story is a good example.

Two disciples are walking on a road from Jerusalem to a place called Emmaus whose location is unknown, except that it was evidently about seven miles from Jerusalem. The mood of these disciples is dark and sombre, for they are still coming to terms with the violent execution of the man they had followed. They had hoped that he was going to redeem their nation of Israel and restore it to greatness, but all their hopes had been brutally dashed. And now there are crazy reports from some women that he is alive, risen from death. What are they to make of that? And as they walk in the late afternoon this stranger joins them, and they pour out their woes to him, and there follows from him an extraordinary explanation of why it was necessary for this man to die, an explanation takes the form of a Bible study that spans the entire Jewish Scriptures. Then they are at Emmaus and the disciples persuade the stranger to stay and to eat with them. And their guest then turns host as he breaks bread with them and suddenly their eyes are opened and they realise: it's Jesus! And can you imagine that moment, that instant when they recognise the one they are mourning, the one they are grieving, the one whose death has demolished their world – suddenly he's there, in reach, at the table. What a moment! And maybe they leap up, or they fall back, or they reach out – but he's gone! 'He vanished from their sight.' Just as they are about to grasp him, he's not there. Why? Could he not have stayed and conversed with them over dinner, and explained a bit more of the Scriptures?

It's interesting: Luke, the writer of this passage, is playing somewhat with the idea of 'opening' in this story. So, on the road as they walk the stranger is 'opening' the Scriptures to the disciples, and then at table their eyes are 'opened'. In other words there is a process of revelation, of disclosure, going on here – but now Jesus is gone. It's so frustrating. Jesus is so elusive. Just when you think you've got him, he vanishes! Just when you think you've grasped him, he disappears. Just when the door swings open it closes. And the disciples sit, perhaps, for a while, as the room grows dark.

Let's return, however, to the road. Can you imagine what it must have been like to hear Jesus, unrecognised, expound the entire Old Testament? We're told that, 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.' As one who attempts to teach the Bible, how I wish I could have heard all that. It is clear from reading the Gospels that Jesus was a creative and imaginative theologian – he knew the ancient Scriptures well and he reconfigured and reinterpreted them in new and striking ways. So how I would love to know what he said on that road. I imagine he must have spoken of Abraham as well as Moses. I imagine he would have spoken of the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt, and of King David, and of mysterious figures like 'the Suffering Servant' and 'the Son of Man'. And doubtless he would have taken them back to Mt Sinai where God called a people into covenant and gave them a Law to live by and tasked them with being a light to the world. And I imagine he would have spoken of things Israel knew about only too well – defeat and captivity and exile. And he would have explained God's purpose in Jesus of entering into the very depths of death and captivity in order to redeem and to reconstitute Israel – exactly what these disciples said they had hoped he would do – fashioning a new people of God out of the old. And he would have explained how Jesus' rising heralds a new creation which has dawned and which will one day be the final chapter of this story. And so the Scriptures are opened, as Jesus joins up the scattered dots of seemingly random history, and no wonder the disciples' hearts burned within them.

This is the great story, the grand narrative of Scripture that Jesus told and explained, and there are two things that must be said about it. Firstly, we need this story, as much today as ever, for it is nothing less than the key that unlocks the mystery of the world, the universe, life itself. Focused as it is on a small patch of turf in what we now call the Middle East, this is a narrative that fills the vast immensities of space. Focused as it is on a small span of years, it echoes throughout all

of time and eternity. The story Jesus told on that walk to some unknown place called Emmaus, witnessed only by those two bereft figures, is the clue to everything. Yes, there are other stories for us to tell, of course. There is the wonderful story that science tells. And there are the stories told by every human discipline, stories that join with art and the human imagination to lead us deeper into reality, disclosing truth and beauty. But overarching them all is this story of God's eternal plan and purposes, and the disciples passed it on and the Church has told it as best it can. At times, of course, that story has been badly mis-told and turned it into something oppressive and destructive, but in its best telling it has brought life to the world. And today, in this part of the world at least, it is almost evening and the day of its telling is nearly over as the sun sets upon it, and this story is being eclipsed - and we have nothing to put in its place. This is our predicament in our secular, post-Christian West. We no longer have a narrative to shape life and to configure time and to provide our bearings for our journey through this world. We are people bereft of a story big enough to satisfy our hunger for meaning.

But, secondly, this story points to Jesus. In this scriptural story we find Jesus, and as we learn to make this story our own we discover that it draws us to him. Yes, Jesus remains elusive, baffling. History, after all, has tried its best to make sense of Jesus. We have tried to explain him, to comprehend him, to fit him into categories that can contain him but always he slips our grasp. So how do we pin him down? How do we relate to this elusive Lord? Well, the story Jesus told draws us to him as we find not a puzzle to be solved, not a riddle to be understood, but a relationship to be lived. We are summoned to follow him, to walk with him like those disciples along the Emmaus road. And as we walk with him – yes, we will find that at times he seems to vanish, to disappear. We will come up against the mystery of absence. We will face those moments when Jesus seemed to be here, with us, but suddenly he is gone. The door closes. But we learn to walk in faith and trust, knowing that nothing can finally separate us from him and that he is always there, waiting for us, further down the road.

One important point, though. Yes, Jesus is elusive and we cannot control him or pin him down. But there are ways we can reach out to him. I'm struck in this story that when the disciples and Jesus reach Emmaus he would have continued without them. 'He walked ahead as if he were going on', we are told. I'm reminded of an earlier incident when the disciples are in a boat out on the lake battling a strong wind and Jesus comes out to them, walking on the water, but we read that 'he intended to pass them by'. How strange! And similarly here at Emmaus, Jesus does not seem inclined to stay with these disciples. But they invite him, in fact they urge him. Maybe they consider this stranger to be at risk: it is nightfall, after all, and to walk on into the dark is dangerous. He is vulnerable. And so they entreat him: 'stay with us...', and he does. And if they hadn't they would have missed that vital moment of communion with him. Well, maybe we learn something here: sometimes Jesus waits to be invited, and that invitation takes the form of simple acts of kindness, of hospitality, of reaching out to the vulnerable. Jesus is elusive, yes, but our reaching out in care and compassion amount to an invitation to him – and in the words of the passage, 'So he went into stay with them.'

The story that Jesus told. The scriptural story of God's purposes for the world in Christ. The story that gives life. The story that leads us to Jesus. Our passage ends at a table with the breaking of bread: 'when he was at table with them he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.' What is happening is that the great story Jesus told is here distilled, crystallised into simple actions, four simple gestures. 'He took... he blessed... he broke... he gave...' We can't pin Jesus down - no. He is an elusive Lord. But he does promise to come to us and to be with us here at the table. He comes to us here and now in this simple act of sharing and eating. But then he is gone – elusive as ever, out into the world, on the road again. And we will meet him there in our searching of the Scriptures, and in our acts of love and service to one another. Amen.