

Eleven Kilometres from Jerusalem: Sermon Preached on 23rd April 2023 (Third Sunday of Easter)

Preached at St John's, Devizes and Christ Church, Bulkington

Readings – Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Luke 24.13-35

“...he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.”

You may or may not know that our Bible readings for any given Sunday repeat on a three year cycle, and I very distinctly remember today's Gospel reading, about the travellers on the road to Emmaus, at this point four cycles ago: on the Sunday that fell a fortnight after Easter in 2011.

I remember it so vividly, because I was in Cape Town, and one unfamiliar detail in this otherwise very familiar passage of Scripture left me feeling disorientated and far from home. Instead of Emmaus being about seven miles from Jerusalem, it was instead about eleven kilometres from Jerusalem. As their country converted entirely to metric two generations ago, miles are an unfamiliar measurement to most South Africans today. Of course, neither miles nor kilometres were used two-thousand years ago in the Roman Empire – both are translations for the convenience for us modern hearers, and Luke originally reported that Emmaus was located sixty stadia from Jerusalem.

I have driven across the Irish border often enough that a switch from miles to kilometres is a familiar experience, and this was a minor quirk of translation – but worship is such an intense and meaningful *thing* for most of us, including those of us who don't go in for emotionally expressive worship, that even very minor changes in ritual, translation, or music can leave us feeling disorientated and bewildered.

We all come to church for many reasons, but I hope the primary one is because worship brings us closer to God. Of course, God is everywhere – but drawing close to God is something that most of us rarely find happens automatically. Sometimes, we don't recognise God even when He is at work right in front of us

– that, of course, lies at the core of the story of Emmaus. Sometimes we need to be in the right place, with our senses being engaged in the right way, to transport us towards God. That’s especially the case in a world where we live with considerable sensory overload through the media and the Internet. Change to our habitual form of worship can be disturbing and disorienting.

Now having said all that, we should at least at times be made to feel that our faith is out of our control – because the aim of our Christian practice is not to gain mastery over ourselves but to place ourselves entirely into the hands of God.

I am the last person in the world who would deny the power of constancy in liturgy both to teach and to transport us to God, or to deny the positive power of ritual to unite us with God and one another, or to argue for change for the sake of change. I am, after all, a member of the Prayer Book Society! Yet sometimes, we need to be reminded that the Christian faith is never something we can control, but something that will inevitably upend some of our certainties on occasion.

So having established that principle, let’s remind ourselves that the events of Easter Day are recorded somewhat differently in each of the four Gospels. Luke’s version, which the journey to Emmaus sits at the centre of, is quite distinct. Most of us are familiar with the idea that the women were the first witnesses to the Resurrection – yet Luke records them as having a slightly less central role. Although the travellers report to their mysterious walking companion that the “women astounded us”, Luke’s women didn’t see Jesus directly on Easter morning, as several do in Matthew’s Gospel and as Mary Magdalene does in John’s. Here the women only get a vision of angels telling them that Jesus is alive. What’s even more interesting is that Luke is *usually* the Gospel writer who gives most prominence to the actions of women – indeed, gives women a prominence and a competence in his stories rarely seen elsewhere in ancient literature. It is he who reports, uniquely, that it is the men at Emmaus who are the first to meet the risen Christ.

Now, to me, these inconsistencies between the Gospels demonstrate a roughness that we would expect in any tale told honestly from different perspectives – a roughness of authenticity, if you will. Nobody has gone over the Gospels with a fine-toothed comb to make all the details consistent. Differences between accounts are natural when different witnesses of the same event are asked to recall what happened: I mean, people these days can't even agree on whether a penalty in a football match should have been given when they have slow motion replays from a dozen different angles. We should be suspicious, not of inconsistency, but instead of highly consistent accounts of strange and unprecedented events, for such are the hallmarks of modern constructed religions from Mormonism to Scientology.

And it is indeed strange and unprecedented that, after spending hours together, the travellers recognise Jesus only when He eats with them – or to narrow it down a bit, when He performs the same actions He did with his closest disciples at the Last Supper, just three nights before. The travellers recognise Jesus when “he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them”. This is exactly what I will do in a few minutes time, after the creed, intercessions, and peace; that's when I'll take bread from one of you sitting in the congregation – I'm not sure from whom – and then bless and break it during the Eucharistic Prayer, and then share it with you.

In the Eucharist, my job as a priest, therefore, is to represent Christ at the Last Supper, and at the first remembering of that supper in Emmaus; to play His role in this holy drama. That is a wonderful privilege and also exceptionally humbling, even a little frightening. For I don't always live up to what that role should demand, and you don't all live up to what your allotted parts in the that drama either. That failure to live up to the standards of Christ, I'm afraid, is a Christian universal.

Look at the way Christians argue about the name of this undefinable and incomprehensible mystery, when all the names in common use express an important truth about it. Eucharist comes from the Greek word for thanksgiving; at Holy Communion we should commune with God; the Lord's

Supper is literally a recreation of the Christ's Last Supper – and the first supper of the Risen Christ at Emmaus; Mass comes from the Latin for “Go, you have been sent.”

I bring the last up, because if our drawing closer to God here in Holy Communion does not inform and sustain how we live the rest of our lives then it can only be a sort of spiritual narcotic, an abuse of God's gift in His sacrament. We draw close to God *here* because we go out into a world where we sometimes find God hard to see.

The Eucharist, the Mass, the Lord's Supper, whatever you call it, must conclude with a sending out into the world. Sometimes it is a bewildering one, as it was for the disciples on the first Maundy Thursday when they left the Upper Room for the terrifying events at Gethsemane; as it was also, for more joyful reasons, for the two disciples at Emmaus.

It must also, for us today, at least some of the time be bewildering and disturbing. For if the roughness of these inconsistent Gospel stories really is a consequence of their authenticity, and the strange encounter at Emmaus really was a conversation with Christ raised from the dead, then something has happened that is beyond human capacity to comprehend, let alone control, and to which the only sane response must be to place ourselves entirely into the hands of God.

Now thanks be to God the Father, who has given us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.