



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The unconscious presence of God

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Luke 24:13-35

¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' They stood still, their faces downcast. ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' ¹⁹ 'What things?' he asked. 'About Jesus of Nazareth,' they replied. 'He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. ²² In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.' ²⁵ He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. ²⁸ As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. ³² They asked each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?' ³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread."

I want turn to the Emmaus Road story, a passage that is both a literary and a spiritual jewel. It is a moving account, a testimony to the resurrection, an explanation of the empty tomb, and an occasion for Luke to summarise many of those themes that he has been exploring in his gospel ... and is profoundly different from the other Easter accounts.

Writers often touch on issues in a book and then, in the final chapter, you see them re-appear with great impact. Luke's final chapter begins with Mark's story of the fearful women, and ends with the disciples embarking on a mission to the world.

The last chapter of Luke is the account of the resurrection, which is found in all the gospels. In common with Matthew, Luke tells of the visit of women to the tomb on Easter Day—and then he moves on to the Emmaus Road story. The opening words of verse 13, "Now that same day..." links the Emmaus Road with the resurrection.

The word 'now' (kai idou) moves the reader's attention to a new and important phase in the Lukan narrative. However, the words 'that same day' tie the incident to Jesus' death and resurrection.

Two followers, one of them named Cleopas, were returning from Jerusalem to Emmaus and were in deep discussion. We are told Cleopas' name in verse 18 ... he is mentioned here and nothing further is known about him. They are joined by an apparent stranger, who professes ignorance of the events which make them downcast.

This account describes how he comes alongside us:

- where we are
- in whatever dilemma we face
- on the journey of life.

The location of Emmaus is still uncertain and there are two possible sites. We are told that it is about 12 kilometres from Jerusalem. The location, however, is not of paramount importance. It is what happened on the road and at the meal that matters most.

Let us look together at the account of the followers hiking out of Jerusalem—perhaps the fact that they are not part of the Twelve is important—in Acts ... 120 at Pentecost.

Gunther Bornkamm in *Jesus of Nazareth*—"The men and women who encounter the risen Christ in the Easter stories have come to an end of their wisdom ... So it is, too, with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the evening of Easter Day; their last hopes, too, are destroyed."

There is in Luke a travel theme, particularly in his unique central section (Chapters 9—19) ... this event occurs when the two followers "were going" (v.13) and "they walked along" (v.15).

Professor Howard Marshall of Aberdeen picked up on the similarity with the journey found in Acts 8 and 9. There we find an Ethiopian Eunuch in conversation with Paul and there is also a request to stay longer ... you see the similarity!

Notice their sadness

We are told in verse 17 "they stood still, their faces downcast".

Any one of us who has lived long enough will have had the experience of deep sadness, either encountering it within themselves or others. What we have to ask in this biblical context is why the disciples were like that.

Two followers of Jesus Christ were walking home one Sunday afternoon from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Their hearts were heavy and their faces sad. They had believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Perhaps they had joined in the triumphal procession only a week before his death. Perhaps they had shouted with the Passover pilgrims, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

They may well have been expecting Him to overthrow the Romans. Perhaps they had watched him turn over the tables in the temple.

But a week from that day, everything was so different. They had seen Pilate give in to the pressure of the crowd and order Jesus crucified. Perhaps they had followed with the crowd to the place of execution. Who knows if they had heard His cries from the Cross itself?

We might feel it appropriate to ask—What kind of sadness was it? I can identify three very honourable reasons why they feel sad:

- they feel sad because they know bereavement. They have been with Jesus and they know that sadness having lost a dear friend.
- they are sad because they are perplexed. They had believed Jesus Christ to be the Truth—now he is dead, but they have more problems because it looks as though evil will be victorious.
- they are sad because they have forfeited their lives in some sense. They had chosen to follow him—was it all now pointless?

Verse 21 tells us they said, "we had hoped". This evening, I am talking about Christian hope, but shattered dreams are what we find here! In our modern world, we too can be at the point of giving up—and need the experience which transforms sadness into living faith.

Now they were relating to the stranger who joined them on the road and who walked by their side. Their vision was so clouded by sorrow that they did not recognise who he was.

As G. B. Caird in his commentary makes quite clear—"It is a remarkable fact that all the time He was with them, the idea never crossed their minds that He was any other than a being of flesh and blood, a foreigner on a visit to Jerusalem."

We live centuries later, and our own experience leads us to understand theirs. We recognise their utter devastation, which leads them to see things less clearly—and causes pains other people will never know.

The sadness they feel has been made worse because people sought to take away even the dignity they had. Notice in Verse 21—"And what is more"—and in Verse 22—"In addition"—and in Verse 24—"Him they did not see".

- they are heavy with sorrow—v.17
- they are filled with disappointment—v.21
- they are completely bewildered—v.v. 22-24

There is much sadness in the world in which we live and we have to deal with it—real experiences of life—not imagined! The cross and resurrection tell me that God does not lift his people out of the world, but encourages us to face up to real life, with him in the midst of our journey and in our struggles.

Let us now seek to apply that principle to the challenge of mission together today. I have lost none of my enthusiasm for Christ, but:

- it is not easy to minister in our everyday context
- we also carry many stories of disappointment
- we acknowledge the need to see God alongside us in our context.

Notice the slowness of their hearts

Verses 25 and 26 give us the words of Jesus to them—"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter glory?"

When writing on this passage, one scholar skilfully comments, "The stranger seizes the platform from the confused disciples."

When they had finished their recital of pain and suffering, Jesus chided them for failure to understand the scriptures. It is a powerful moment to hear Jesus expound the Christology of the Old Testament, for we are told in verse 27 that he began with Moses and all the prophets and explained what the scriptures had to say about Him ... a film of that last chapter of Luke would be wonderful.

I suspect we have all had experiences of being slow of heart. This is a different issue than sadness, for here it is not our experience or emotion that is the problem because of what we have journeyed through, it is much more fundamentally our unwillingness to believe.

- we are slow of heart to believe—we are much more ready to believe others rather than God
- we have a sharpness of mind in belief, but not a ready heart. The Pauline affirmation of believing and confessing is helpful (Romans 10:10)
- here the followers are slow of heart, after being taught by the Master himself.

At least these followers were listening—and, while that was happening, there was bound to be hope. It would lead them to the invitation for Jesus to stay with them following the ancient custom of hospitality. As the afternoon drew on and supper time approached the stranger would need food and lodging and they were prepared to give it. Perhaps it was the way he talked that led them to want to know more.

You will notice that Jesus is prepared to receive their invitation—we are told that, as a stranger, he naturally acted as though he was going on his way. It was at the supper table that important events took place. In the familiar way, "He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." We are told quite clearly "then their eyes were opened and they recognised Him."

The spiritual eye is to me like an inward ability which accurately corresponds to the natural eye which opens and closes. Similarly, our spiritual eye needs to be opened.

The whole of the afternoon's conversation would begin to dawn upon them. There is a sense of awe in their conversation ... they were reliving the events.

The recognition scene is unquestionably the high point in the narrative, while from a church perspective the relationship to the Communion is unquestionably clear. We must not lose touch with the table scene which is characteristic of Luke and of his special source material.

What gives this a Eucharistic feel is the remarkable way in which Jesus took the role of host, when in fact he is there as a stranger.

Only when we allow Jesus to become host within our lives can we really fully appreciate the presence of God; a presence which comes to us in the midst of fears.

The firm foundations of the Christian faith are based upon the hope of the Risen Lord. It is the non-negotiable centre of the Christian faith. However, resurrection is not just an event in history—it is a happening that occurs as we allow him to come alongside us.

Only as we allow the Risen Lord to come alongside in our specific circumstances can we experience Resurrection as a community of faith:

- Resurrection for us will mean gaining a common vision
- Resurrection for us will be getting beyond the fierce loyalty of tradition to grasp—together—a new Christian concern for the future

- Resurrection for us will come—as always—through dying to self.

Notice the way in which they moved with speed

After making the obvious comment about the slowness of their response, the whole picture changes in verse 33 when we are told "they got up and returned at once to Jerusalem".

On the way to Emmaus, the followers were weary. This would make the 12 kilometre walk even more tiring, because I think weariness is more than just being tired. It involves all kinds of other factors. A person who is full of joy and has nothing heavy on his heart can walk twelve kilometers and feel energetic, but give him a heavy heart and the journey will feel much longer.

As a pastor, I have made some of those journeys—for myself and in support of others. Breaking the news of the death of a loved one can feel as though you are carrying a great burden, which does not fall easily because you impart the news. But we must recognise the followers' speed now they are filled with the joy of the Risen Christ.

The news that Jesus Christ had been raised was discovered at that table—it changed what was going on in their hearts—this news was too wonderful to keep to themselves. They must share it with the sorrowing disciples back in Jerusalem ... Mission Motivation!

The experience at the table was vital, but they further reflected—Verse 32—"Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us." The experience here is undoubtedly deep, but it produced speed, energy and vision.

When the Emmaus travellers arrived back, they could hardly get a word in, for they were greeted with news of the Resurrection—but that did not matter. What did make a difference to them was that the unconscious presence of God had come alongside them, just as he can come alongside each one of us.

The result of this coming alongside them was:

- a deep, inward sense of the presence of God
- an instinctive sense of a work to be done
- a willingness to tell others of Jesus Christ. It is not enough to say, "Let the story speak for itself."

Whenever the unconscious presence of God comes alongside us, it gives us hearts ready to share, even when the journey is painful.

I read an anecdote regarding an interview with an Air Hostess (now called Cabin Staff), who talked about the fear of flying that exists for many people ... 70% of passengers are fearful of flying. More worrying ... 76% of cabin staff were also afraid, but most disturbing (if true) ... 92% of pilots confessed some fear ! That fear is channelled or sublimated into an acute concentration of mind.

The fear of the disciples was translated into a pounding and vibrant faith which led them to return with speed to Jerusalem—and the unconscious presence of God was at work within them.

In Tom Wright's marvellous work "The Resurrection of the Son of God", he makes the straightforward point that "In Luke's work, as in the other narratives, there is no hint that the primary meaning of Jesus' resurrection has anything to do with anyone else's personal post-mortem future." The conclusion is not "You too can have life after death" or anything like it,

“but rather that the whole purpose of God’s plan for Israel and the world has come to an unexpected climax and we’ve now to implement it in the world.”

- Hope sees beyond death
- Hope in life—a new vision for this world.

Michael Wilcock told the story of the young man reading the gospel at his ordination service. When he reached the last verse, he added a sentence at the end of his reading—“Here ends the gospel”. The Bishop was heard to growl—“Heaven forbid!”

The gospel is alive in our lives and service in the world! He comes alongside us and breathes hope into everything we do.