

Easter 3 26th April 2020

Luke 24:13-35 – “Understanding Backwards”

Contempatio – Michael Wood (Rev’d)

A Jewish scholar by the name of Carl Braaten asks this question, “if it is true that the Messiah of which our ancient prophets spoke has already come, how then do you explain the present state of the world?” (Israelis, Jews and Jesus. P. 26).

It’s not a bad question. The world is quite obviously in a mess so what’s God up to?”

This is a theme we have already started to look at during this time of Covid19 . What does resurrection mean at a time of so much rapid and unexpected death? In a way, the question relates directly to the resurrection story we just heard from Luke’s gospel.

All the resurrection accounts are slightly different – but one thing they have in common is a kind of *disorientation* on the part of the first witnesses, with a wide range of responses including alarm, terror, amazement, fear, joy, disbelief, confusion, sadness, doubt, confession and worship.

In other words, for the first witnesses, and often for people who come to follow Jesus in the 21st century, there is a kind of gradual *dawning* of awareness. Even St Paul’s extremely dramatic encounter with the raised Christ starts with a question, ‘who are you’?

In his book ‘Surprised by Joy’, CS Lewis describes his own long and difficult journey of coming to faith. In the book he says, “*God’s saving work of love in Christ is a mystery which surprises us in the midst of darkness. It is a complete gift which we may only recognise in hindsight*”.

It’s very easy to get all misty eyed and romantic in hearing this little line by CS Lewis. We might say, ‘isn’t it great that finally the light broke through’. But the critical point was that darkness was an inescapable part of CS Lewis’s journey, as it is for many of us, and it was only the revelation of Christ which could illuminate his past in such a way that he could make sense of it.

This actually provides us with an incredibly important interpretative [hermeneutical] principle for understanding history and reading the Bible. If Jesus is the decisive revelation of God, as Christians believe he is, then we must read the Bible *backwards* from Christ. Or another way of saying this is that we ought not to start with some philosophical abstraction about the nature of God; OR even start with a picture of God created in our minds by reading the Hebrew Scriptures, and then try to see how Jesus fits into this pre-existing image. RATHER, we need to START with Jesus and then see how Jesus illuminates the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. If we don’t do this we will get into a terrible muddle.

I’m not just making this up. We are actually being GIVEN this interpretative, or hermeneutical, key in today’s gospel reading [it was also a key insight of the great 20th Century theologian, Karl Barth, and is currently being so well communicated by Professor Douglas Campbell at Duke University].

Part of the reason these two disciples, plodding along the road, were so disoriented is that NOTHING is their linear, forward reading view of scripture (which, for them, was the Hebrew Scriptures) could prepare them for a crucified Messiah. It was inconceivable. Their image of God was, most likely, like most cultures in history, shaped by images of glory and power, in a worldly sense.

We get a hint of this in their statement to Jesus (not knowing that it's Jesus), "he was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel".

Perhaps they remembered the Jesus who was able to heal the centurion's slave at a distance without even touching him. Perhaps they remembered the Jesus who could do the sorts of things which were associated with the coming Kingdom of God...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. (Luke 7).

Here was a prophet 'mighty in deed and word'and that was all TRUE, but here was a man who was also tortured and killed, and it was this last bit that they couldn't get their heads around.

How could a prophet who died be of any use to Israel? How could a prophet like this be a redeemer? Even the notion of redeemer would have had political overtones of a renewed David Kingship OR perhaps of a great teacher like Moses. There were various types of Messianic expectations floating around in the first century, but none of them included death on a cross.

So the mysterious risen Jesus, who these guys walking to Emmaus, *could not recognise*, had to point them to the things about himself in the scriptures which they had *not seen*. He had to help them to read the Bible *backwards*. This didn't mean, as is sometimes suggested, that Jesus helped them find all the proof texts in the Hebrew scriptures which were always there but other people were just too stupid to see. What it did mean was sensitising them to the actions of God in the past, which were hints or foretastes of the loving and merciful character of God, which now, as CS Lewis observed, could be seen in hindsight.

Almost certainly this would have included the passages in Isaiah about the suffering servant of God...who bore the burdens of a nation. Christian readers of the Hebrew Scriptures came to see these stories as foretastes of what they came to see most fully in Jesus. Love, by its very nature, wants to empathise with and carry the burdens of others.

So this being the case, the saving/resurrecting work of God is actually revealed THROUGH the suffering of Christ rather than in spite of it.

This possibility was not immediately obvious to the disciples so Jesus has sensitise their imaginations to the possibility of a different kind of God to the one they expected...certainly a God who had been showing up in the story of the Jewish people, but a vision of God constantly contaminated by forces of power, violence and empire.

And so after a day of having their imaginations softened up by this man walking with them, having been helped to read their tradition in reverse, they have now been prepared by Jesus to receive him not only intellectually but physically, in this present moment in the breaking of bread.

"When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. **Then their eyes were opened**, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight".

Just like we heard in John's Gospel last week, this risen Jesus is not just a resuscitated corpse like Lazarus. This risen Jesus is far more mysterious. He appears and disappears and changes appearance. Maybe the message that the early church was trying to communicate was that we could meet Christ at any time and not even be aware of it....that we should treat every person we meet as if they were Christ, just in case they are.

One thing is certainly clear for the early church is that Christ was likely to be experienced in the breaking of the bread in Jesus name. So we also have in this story the shape of our present day Eucharistic worship...which basically consists of two things. Firstly, the breaking open of the WORD (Jesus walking along the road teaching from the scriptures), so that we might be sensitised to how to recognise Christ when he *does* appear. And secondly, the breaking of the bread...in which we may suddenly, like the first disciples, recognise the real presence of Christ in our midst in bread and in each other.

Sometimes we forget that Christ is still appearing to people today in a thousand different ways and with as many faces as people have needs. He is likely to surprise us at any moment!