

Sermon: The Emmaus Journey, part 2

Texts: Exodus 25:23-30; Luke 24:13-28

There are two parts to the Emmaus Journey:
Jesus on the road interpreting the Scriptures to two men;
And the second, on which we focus today:

Jesus at table –

- breaking bread
- and, at the precise moment of recognition, vanishing from sight.

One of several themes in Luke's Gospel is his portrayal of Jesus as a **journeying guest**.

- Martha welcomes Jesus into her home.
- Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus' home.
- He tells several parables about dining, hospitality and unexpected guests, not forgetting the feast at the homecoming of the prodigal son.

And today ... at the end of Luke's Gospel
the guest has become the host.

“Stay with us,” the disciples urge their guest.

And he does.

And while he is at table with them,
in a manner deeply reminiscent of the Last Supper,
he takes bread,
blesses it,
breaks it
and gives it to them.

We are left in no doubt whatsoever about
who is the *real* host at this table
and *what* the *true nature* of this meal is.

Taking ... blessing ... breaking ... giving

What Jesus does with the bread at table
is **precisely** what Jesus, the Son of God, does with our **humanity**.

In him (and for our salvation) our humanity has been
taken by the living God,
blessed (or sanctified) through Jesus' life of faith and obedience
broken on the Cross at Calvary
and *given* back to us in the Resurrection.

The Gospel in a nutshell –
symbolised ... remembered ... celebrated
every time Jesus' followers gather around the table
at which he is the host.

And, Luke informs us, it is at the precise moment that Jesus

takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the disciples,
their eyes are opened!!

Caravaggio's 17th century depiction of this scene captures the moment very well, I think.

Why is it *this* moment, and none other, that the recognition occurs?

The answer, I believe, lies in the significance of the bread itself.

Though you may not realise it,
it goes a long way back in the Old Testament.

In Exodus 25 and Leviticus 24 we find certain instructions:
12 loaves of bread were to be placed in the inner sanctuary,
and were called the **Bread of the Presence**,
to be eaten *only* by the *priests*
and *only* on the *Sabbath*.

The Bread of the Presence was to be a constant reminder of God's Holy Presence with his people.

So what was happening at that Emmaus Supper?

Nothing less than a *new* Bread of Presence was being given and consumed.

Not now ... *only* by the priests, on a certain day, and in a certain place.
Now the Bread of Presence is eaten by all to whom it is given,
wherever and whenever it is given,
by Jesus,
the travelling guest
and indeed High Priest.

A crucial development has taken place!

This Emmaus Supper is no mere re-enactment of the Last Supper,
no mere memorial of his death.
It is a **Resurrection meal**,
hosted by the Risen Christ.

When the early Church celebrated the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day
they were not commemorating the tragic death of a hero,
or mourning the premature death of an inspired teacher.

Like the two men on the road to Emmaus
they were gathering in the presence of the living Christ,
to be joined to him in his death and resurrection
to be fed by him,
and given strength for the journey.
- strength to grow in love of God and neighbour.

Without doubt the act of Communion stood at the centre of the life of the Early Church.

John Calvin knew this too!

He laid it down:

“It would be well to require that the Communion of the Holy Supper of the Lord be held every Sunday.”

Why?

Calvin said there were three benefits:

1. We receive Christ himself
and participate in the blessings of his death and resurrection;
2. We come to recognise the continuing blessings of Christ
and respond with lives of gratitude and praise;
3. We are aroused to ‘holy living’,
for by receiving Christ our lives are conformed to Christ.

Calvin didn’t get his way in Geneva.

The influence of Zwingli, an earlier Reformer was too strong.

Zwingli lowered the significance of the sacrament,
and that lowered significance of Communion has weakened the life of Reformed churches ever since.

But Calvin was adamant.

There are *two* marks of the church, he said:
Word *and* Sacrament.

In the proclamation of the Word,
the truth of God’s radical hospitality in Christ is announced and promised.

In the celebration of the Supper,
this truth is remembered and received.

Joseph Small says:

The question to be asked of any congregation or denomination
is whether word and sacraments
are found at the heart of their life together.

Whilst they might engage in many other activities,
designating word and sacrament as marks of the church
means that these other activities
must not bury word and sacrament,
or push them to the periphery of church life.

They form the core of what we do.

What happens when the two are out of kilter,
when the act of gathering around the Table
is no longer regarded as a necessary part of Christian worship?

Small identifies three dangers.

1. **We become obsessed with words,**
and our theology and worship become overly cerebral.
This has been one of the accusations levelled at Presbyterianism
– with some justification perhaps.

2. **Words are what we fight about and what we fight with.**
Reformed churches, Small observes,
so neglectful of the sacraments,
so tied to words,
are the churches that have divided and split
more than any other church movement or tradition.

3. As the sense of being-in-communion with one another is eroded
so the **rampant individualism** which pervades Western culture
also pervades the Church.

I would add a fourth danger:

The more peripheral to Church life is the breaking of bread,
the more Christian worship risks losing its basic character and shape.

This is not to pour cold water on creativity and improvisation.
It is simply to say that,
as with music,
so too with worship:
creativity and improvisation depend upon
an underlying structure.

In music this consists of a regular, predictable chord structure.

For Calvin, as for the early Church,
Christian worship consists of a two-part structure –
the Service of the Word
and the Service of the Lord's Supper.

And throughout most of its history
the Presbyterian Church has upheld this structure
even when Communion has not been celebrated.

How important do we believe this pattern to be today?
Amidst the increasingly diverse forms of worship
does it have any relevance?

I think it is significant
that when our two Emmaus-bound travellers returned to Jerusalem
full of excitement about their encounter on the road,
they testified to the fact
that Christ had been made known to them *in the breaking of the bread.*

They also said

that their hearts burned within them
as Jesus talked with them on the road,
opening the scriptures to them ...
*but (I say again) it was in the breaking of the bread
that he was made known to them.*

Did we overlook this when the PCANZ settled upon its five faces of mission?

We identified the need to make Jesus Christ known through

- teaching and nurturing people in Christian faith
- loving service responding to human need
- proclaiming the gospel
- transforming society
- and caring for creation

Surely we haven't overlooked the tremendous truth confronting us at this moment ...

... Jesus making himself known through the act of breaking bread!

Look ... if you want a link

between worship and mission

look no further than the Emmaus journey

- Jesus making himself known on the road and at table.

Whilst this meal might form the heart of the Church's life,
it is not to be kept within the Church.

It is a *missional* meal, a meal for the road.

It is missional in several ways:

1. It is missional in terms of who it is for:

As with the early Church so too with us:

In eating and drinking with the Lord,

we continue a pattern from Jesus' life.

Jesus was notorious for eating and drinking with sinners.

In this meal, Jesus eats and drinks with sinners still.

Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 11 against eating and drinking unworthily
does not negate the radical inclusiveness of this meal.

We need only recall who the first recipients of Jesus' Supper were:

Judas, who betrayed him;

Peter, who denied him;

and the other disciples, who abandoned him and fled.

Such is the missional hospitality of our Lord.

2. It is missional in terms of what it anticipates:

Holy Communion is rightly called a meal of remembrance.

But in the act of remembering,

we become participants in a drama that is still unfolding,

for the Risen Christ goes before us
and his Spirit is at work.

As we welcome to this Table all whom Jesus loves,
there is a sense in which we look forward
to the great heavenly banquet about which Jesus told parables,
when *all* the faithful will feast with God,
and all creation will join in a song of unending praise.

This sacrament provides the church with a sustaining vision and a vital hope.

The initiative in all of this
is the Lord's, not ours.

Whilst you and I might hope to make Jesus Christ known
in all that we say and do,
there is a deeper truth at work in our midst
– *that of Jesus making himself known.*

Jesus – interpreting to his followers the things about himself in the scriptures
Jesus – giving himself to them in the breaking of the bread.

You and I cannot usurp his initiative!!

We have become a frantically busy Church ...
... looking for new ways to be relevant and effective
in a time of institutional decline
as though it all depended on us
and our skill in turning things around.

But in the midst of all our innovation,
our restructuring,
our talk about making Jesus Christ known,
let us ask ourselves this question:

**Is anything more important for Christ's Church
(for ourselves in Assembly)
than the recovery of a truly sacramental life,
a rediscovery of the joy and wonder
of knowing Jesus Christ
in the act of breaking bread together?**

It is *not* just a matter of
how often we celebrate Communion
– quarterly or monthly or weekly.

It's about how we understand ourselves in relation to this act.
It's about how we understand ourselves in relation to the Sacrament:
About the balance between Word and Sacrament,
About the link between the Church and the world,
About the connection between worship, hospitality and mission.

Do you think we can reach a point in Church life

where we are able to affirm together
that our hearts burned within us while Jesus was talking to us on the
road?
while he interpreted the scriptures to us?

Do you think we might reach a point in our experience of worship
when we may boldly
and with enthusiasm
be ready to declare
that he has been made known to us in the breaking of the bread?

And should we not be praying, with all God's people, for this to come about?

Amen.