

Sermon: The Emmaus Journey, part 1

Texts: Isaiah 55:9-13; Luke 24:13-28

This morning, in Luke 24, we encounter one of the most dramatic readings
in the whole New Testament:

The Emmaus Journey.

There are two parts to this story.

The first part, which I shall be addressing this morning,
concerns our Lord interpreting the Scriptures to the two men.

The second concerns Jesus at Table with them,
which I shall address in our Sunday morning service
at St Patrick's College.

This story sets before us what Calvin and others
affirm as the essential marks of the Church
- the Word and Sacraments.

And it does for both in their proper Easter setting.

We begin with the two travellers to Emmaus **standing still, looking sad.**

They are close followers of Jesus who just a week ago
celebrated his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

Now Jesus has died,
and they are in the grip
of a potent mix of grief and disappointment.

You can sense their despair in the words

"We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel".

Had hoped means that hope is gone. This is hope in the past tense.

It is this candour which draws *us* in.

This is about those who have held on to Jesus' message,
but whose lives are in limbo

because God's plan seems to have petered out.

It's about those of us who can't quite get our minds around Easter.

It's about two people on the road to Emmaus

along with all people since then

whose hope is past-tense hope.

It's about us ... in our post-Christendom bewilderment,

wondering how God's promises relate

to the relentlessness of institutional decline.

As we reflect on this text,

we're tempted to keep our eyes on the two disciples,
tracing their movement towards hope and faith.

But the text puts the spotlight on Jesus.

It is *his* actions which provide the impetus for the narrative.

Jesus' first action is simple but profound:

Jesus came near and went with them.

It's an unremarkable sentence ... until we remember its context:

It is just 10 verses after a cosmos-changing event ... the resurrection.
And here is Jesus ... Risen from the dead ... out on a dusty road ... coming
alongside two disciples.

Frederick Buechner says of this text:

You'd have expected a little more post-resurrection fanfare –
an angel choir filling the sky with a Hallelujah chorus perhaps.
But instead, Jesus is pursuing two sad pilgrims
on a dusty road to a little village out back of beyond.
He comes in the middle of all their questions.
It's the sheer ordinariness of it all that is so striking.

That

and the fact that the disciples do not yet know who their new companion is.
There is an intriguing interplay throughout this event
between recognition and non-recognition,
between the risen Lord's presence and his absence.
When Jesus is with the disciples on the road,
they fail to recognise him;
when they recognise him at table,
he vanishes from their sight.
Even when he makes himself known,
he remains strangely elusive –
a salutary reminder to us
that the Lord whom we meet on the road ... and at table
remains altogether free
of our attempts to constrain him,
to shape him in our image,
to enlist his support for our own cultural...
theological ...and politically defined agendas.

Jesus says to the Emmaus travellers,
and he says to his church ... to us:
"How foolish, how slow of heart you are."

The rebuke is not in relation to some minor indiscretion,
oversight or neglect.
The rebuke challenges the way these two men
have been looking at the world,
how they have been perceiving God's plan.
It challenges their assumptions about Jesus –
Because their assumptions have wildly underestimated
the kind of change he is effecting. ...

It's the radical change Paul spoke of when writing to the Galatians:
"All of you who were baptized into Christ
have been clothed with Christ.
**There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus**" (Galatians 3:27-28).

As Paul sees it, the very things in society which at times divide us
or allow one group to oppress another
now give way to a new unifying and reconciling reality.

Those who would follow Christ and sit at table with him
**are now committed to a new vision
for how the world might be arranged.**

Those *in Christ*, see the world differently.

They see a new ordering of reality and pray it into being:
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

How difficult this is ...

what resistance it provokes.

Like the scribes and Pharisees,

we can be so convinced we are right,

so conditioned into thinking that prevailing

attitudes and patterns of behaviour are okay,

that nothing less than a rebuke from the Lord will do.

But the rebuke is only the beginning!

Jesus follows it with a Bible Study,

walking the disciples through **Moses and all the prophets.**

Just as he had done in his hometown synagogue,

just as Philip would do a few years later with an Ethiopian seeker,

Jesus directs their attention to the scriptures.

No signs and wonders;

just a lengthy Bible study.

Patient ... time-consuming work

that points to the power and trustworthiness of scripture.

**One of the catch-cries of the Reformation was *sola scriptura*:
scripture alone!**

Scripture alone ... a protest against competing sources of authority.

It led to the Reformed Church making the Bible its "supreme standard".

It led to the authors of the Westminster Confession

beginning with a chapter on Holy Scripture

before they talked about the Holy Trinity.

We Presbyterians hold a "high" view of scripture.

We have argued at length

about *how* the Bible functions as the Word of God.

We have argued about doctrines of

inspiration, inerrancy and infallibility.

In our Book of Order we've asserted that the Word of God

is somehow "contained" in the Bible.

In the church of Wittenberg, home of the Reformation,

a 400 year-old picture (altar cloth) hangs behind the communion table

It shows Martin Luther preaching there to his congregation.

He has one hand resting on an open Bible,

signifying the Bible is central to both preaching and worship.

His other hand points to Jesus,

who is depicted hanging on the Cross

midway between the preacher and his Wittenberg congregation.

It says something very important

about the mediating presence of Christ.

He is the One to whom the scriptures bear witness.
He is also the One who interprets the scriptures to both preacher and congregation.

It is his voice they must hear.

John Calvin was fond of saying that
in the pulpit Christ must preside.
The preacher is but the mouthpiece
for this act of divine self-communication.

What you see in that old picture in Wittenberg ...
the mediating role of Christ ...
is entirely consistent with what we see on the road to Emmaus.
The disciples don't just *study* the scriptures.
They *hear the voice of Jesus* through that study.

This is a vitally important distinction.

It is entirely possible
to study the Bible,
to quote from the Bible
to preach from the Bible
in such a way that the voice of Jesus is obscured,
even silenced.

As much as the Bible has inspired great acts of faith and service,
we must also acknowledge – often to our shame –
that it has been used to:

- Claim the superiority of one race or ethnic group over another
- Propagate anti-Semitism
- Sanction horrendous acts of violence and ethnic cleansing
- Justify the subordination of women to men and related acts of domestic violence

The frightening possibility for all of us charged with the responsibility of preaching ...

is that our congregations might hear in our words
not something that makes their hearts burn within,
as with the Emmaus travellers,
but rather something that weighs heavily upon their hearts
- a yoke grievous to be borne.

We Presbyterians have a reputation for being a rather dour lot ...

known more for a sense of duty
than an abundance of joy;
known more for our frowning disapproval
than our praise and celebration.

There are some among us who may remember sloping floors in church halls,
built (I am told) to discourage dancing.

Others may remember the practice of 'fencing the Table',
or restricting access to Holy Communion
to those deemed worthy enough to partake.

We may no longer be quite so restrictive or stern,

but such practices are part of our history.
For many, the word "Presbyterian" is a pejorative term,
And we can't blame this entirely on our Scottish ancestry!

Recently, I was privileged to hear the testimony
of a heavily tattooed and dreadlocked young man who,
like the prodigal son,
had wandered into the "far country",
where his life was dominated by violence and drug and alcohol abuse.

One Sunday morning he went to his local church.
What did he hear that day that led to his conversion?
A word of condemnation?
An exhortation to get his act together?

No, this is what he heard:
"Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest."

The words ... the *voice* of Jesus.

That day the young man heard
what we should all know to be true:
that the Word of God is life-giving.

In the words of Isaiah:

As the rain and snow come down from heaven,
and do not return without watering the earth,
making it bud and flourish,
so is God's word.

It does not return to empty,
but accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent.

How are we to understand that purpose?

Isaiah describes it in expansive terms:
Mountains and hills will burst into song,
trees will clap their hands,
thorn-bushes will give way to pine trees
and briars to myrtle (Isaiah 55:12-13).

What we have in these words
is a poetic vision of redemption ...
... redemption not just of the people of Israel,
not just of humankind even,
but of all creation ...

... an enabling of the whole of creation
to join in the joyful praise of its Creator,
to share somehow in what the Westminster divines said
was the chief end of humanity:
glorifying God and enjoying God forever!

If ever a generation needed to be reacquainted
with the biblical vision of *shalom* for the whole of creation,
surely that generation is ours!!

**For do we not confront the stark realities of climate change
and the resultant threats to the very future of our planet?!!**

You know how John begins his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

And this Word "became flesh and lived for a while among us.
We have seen his glory,
the glory of the one and only Son,
who came from the Father,
full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Is that not what our two travellers beheld that day on the road to Emmaus
as they heard the voice of Jesus
through their study of the scriptures?
Is that not what made their hearts burn within,
and compelled them to declare ... with conviction ...
that the Lord is risen?!!

You see ... *if* Christ is risen ...
then the new order which Isaiah envisaged so many years ago
is no longer a vision –
it is an emerging reality.

The *dabar* (Word) of God is not returning empty;
it is accomplishing that for which it was sent.
In Christ ... the Word made flesh ... a new Kingdom or commonwealth
has been inaugurated.
Was not this precisely his claim
when he spoke at the commencement of his ministry
in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth?

In the Emmaus story,
the locus of this new Kingdom-reality
is the act of sitting at table with the One who takes bread,
gives thanks,
breaks it
and gives it to his disciples.

It is *then*, we are told ... that the disciples' eyes are opened
and they recognize the One who interpreted the scriptures on the road.

We will explore further implications of this theme
when we meet together on Sunday morning.
But arising out of our thinking today,
I would say the following:

We all know that the Church in the Western world
is currently undergoing a major process of change.
The scope of this change is no less significant
than that of the Reformation in the sixteenth century,
and is likely to have equally far-reaching effects.

Both periods of change have a *reactionary* dimension to them.
In the Reformation it was reaction to the perceived distortions
and errors of the medieval Church.
In our day, it is reaction to the collapse of Christendom,
the consequent reality of institutional decline
and the need to do many things differently.

But reaction is only *one* driver of change.
The other is *theological conviction*.
The Reformers firmly believed
it is the Holy Spirit who is the real agent of reform.
Hence the motto,
Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda –
“The Church reformed ... and always to be reformed”.
The Church does not reform itself.
It is the Holy Spirit who reforms the Church,
in accordance with the Word of God.

The Reformers were convinced that reform ...
if it is of the Spirit ...
will conform closely to the teaching of scripture
and the life of the early church.

And it will adhere to the teaching and example of Christ!
Sola scriptura ... Yes!
but also *sola Christus ... Christ alone!*
We *must* listen for the voice of Jesus
in our reading and interpretation of scripture.

One of the serious charges the old Church authorities hurled at the Reformers
was that they were “innovating”.
John Calvin responded to this and other charges in his treatise
The Necessity of Reforming the Church.
He said the Reformers were *not* innovating,
but **restoring the Church to its true nature**,
purified from innovations that riddled the Church
through centuries of inattention to Scripture
and theological laxity.

Today we use the phrase “emerging Church”
to describe the huge adjustment to life in a post-Christendom era.
It is regularly associated with a spirit of innovation and experimentation,
not least of which in relation to the act of worship.
**But let us not blur the distinction
between innovation
and reform.**

And let us heed Calvin’s warning against
inattention to Scripture
and theological laxity.

Some time ago, I asked a retiring colleague
what was the biggest change he had observed

in almost forty years of ministry.

He replied:

Whereas he could once assume that his congregation
would be familiar with the text upon which he was preaching,
nowadays he could no longer make that assumption.

Disciplined attentiveness to the Scriptures
in personal devotions ... public worship ... and theological discourse
is no longer a defining characteristic of who we are and what we do.

We are fast becoming a people of words,
but not a people of the Word.

Was my colleague's lament
a sentimental yearning for a bygone era ...
... or an astute diagnosis?

One thing is certain:

During this time of rapid change
we will experience tensions between innovation and reform,
between pragmatism and theological conviction,
and between what we believe is necessary for today
and what is faithful to Scripture.

In the midst of these tensions we will require prayerful discernment,
to hear what the Spirit is saying.

The theme ... "Reformed and Reforming,"
with its emphasis upon identity and direction,
is intended to encourage us all
in this crucial task of discernment.