

SERMON - 26 APRIL 2020 - ROAD TO EMMAUS

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I love the story of the Road to Emmaus. Partly because it is the lesson set for Easter Sunday evening, and Festal Evensong on Easter Sunday evening is one of my favourites. The morning is always lovely, packed church, Easter Candle, Easter eggs - but the evening is special. I don't have to work as hard - one thing I can do is sing Choral Evensong without too much difficulty - so I can relax into the service. The flowers are glorious, the music is sublime, and the reading takes us back to the first Easter Sunday evening. I can walk with the disciples, and feel very close to Christ.

A couple of people, walking back the 7 miles or so from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and they are trying to get their heads round what has happened. For obvious reasons, I usually walk by myself - but occasionally I have the pleasure of a walk with a friend, and a long conversation while you do it. Many of you do most of your walking with people who are close to you. One of the ancient traditions is that the couple were husband and wife, and I love that idea. "One of them, whose name was Cleopas" - it would be so typical of the church that his name is recorded and her name isn't. I will go for Mr and Mrs Cleopas.

Three years ago I had a day in London with a friend. We walked and talked and called in at a couple of churches for my blog. One of them was the Guild Church of St Margaret Pattens in Rood Lane, just off Eastcheap in the City. It is a church built by Christopher Wren between 1684-87 (interesting that it was twenty years after the Great Fire of London fire before it was rebuilt, a reminder that disasters can take many years to recover from). This picture is above the altar. Nothing tells me who the artist was, but he (I assume it was a he) also thinks it was Mr and Mrs Cleopas.



<http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2017/05/01/guild-church-of-st-margaret-pattens-london/>

Faith is often something that we share with the person closest to us - and I can imagine these two trying to understand what had happened in the last week.

OK, let's be honest, if they were disciples of Jesus, or even just followers, you would have thought that they would have recognised him when he came up and joined them on the road. If they had listened to him, heard him preach, hung on his words - why didn't they recognise him when he joined them on the road? Surely they would have known. Well yes, but don't forget they had seen the opposition, they might have seen the arrest, they might have witnessed the crucifixion - or, at least, they had heard the news. The Romans are experts, they know how to kill someone - crucifixion was normal, if they hadn't seen Jesus crucified, they had certainly seen others dying on a cross. If you know someone has been crucified, that they are dead, you are not going to look at a stranger and decide "oh, it's him, he's alive".

The National Gallery in London has their collection on line - indeed they've got so much online that I could easily fill another couple of years of lock down by working my way through their exhibitions (only joking - it'll take me a couple of years to read my railway books, that's the first job to do!). I did a search, and this one fits the bill. It is by Lelio Orsi who is recorded as a painter in Reggio in northern Italy in 1536 and 1544. In 1553-4 he visited Venice and Rome, and after 1559 he was in Novellara. That's about all we know, there are no contemporary records of his paintings, and just one signed drawing. A group of small religious paintings, all by the same hand, are attributed to him and they show the influence of Michelangelo. (Now you know as much about Orsi as I do).



<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/lelio-orsi-the-walk-to-emmaus>

It's a dark scene, it doesn't feel like the light of Easter, but of course it wasn't. It was dark and confusing - they were discussing the death of the man they thought had been the Messiah. They had had hope and purpose - and that seems to have died. "They stood still, looking sad" - it had (if you'll excuse the phrase) been a hell of a week. They were tired, they were sad, and - yes - there's been some suggestions that the tomb was empty, but it's the women who said that so do you believe it? (I can imagine Cleopas making that comment, and his wife not being amused). I also like the hats.

The man with them starts to talk, to talk about what has happened (even though a few minutes earlier he had said he didn't know), and he puts it in the context of their faith. The Jews were people of faith, and they needed to have it explained in the context of their faith. That's important. It's worth reminding ourselves that in these confused times, one of the ways we will make sense of it all is by making the contacts with the past, and the contacts with our faith. Not easy when our buildings, the holy places we have cherished for centuries, are not available. Interesting article on the ITV news website yesterday with a Muslim Imam talking about the difficulty his community is having, dealing with what's going on today when their mosques are closed and they are struggling to put Covid-19 in the context of their faith. (Worth reminding ourselves too that the majority of deaths so far have been in BAME (Black and Multi-Ethnic community), and questions need to be asked why that is).

<https://www.itv.com/news/2020-04-24/i-can-t-tell-you-how-many-bodies-we-ve-picked-up-muslim-community-on-effect-of-coronavirus-ahead-of-ramadan/>

But making sense of it all is not just a job that needs doing now - making sense of the way the world changes (and needs to change) is going to be a job for the next few years. A sense of faith, history and community will be very important.

Back to Emmaus. An hour or so later, they reach their home, and the stranger makes to continue his journey. "Stay with us" they say - in that culture you offer hospitality - and they sit down to supper. I found this lovely stained glass window in St Mary's church Tadcaster up in North Yorkshire. Tadcaster is the nearest town to where our Hannah is now living, and Julie and I had an explore the other week. This is a rather gorgeous window - and when I wrote about my visit in the magazines a couple of months ago it was rather nice that John (one of the St Matthew's magazine editors) was baptised in that very church - it's a small world.



<http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2020/02/01/tadcaster-north-yorkshire-st-mary/>

I love the way it is in the breaking of the bread that they recognise Jesus. I love it - and it's painful, because that is what I want to do today. I want to stand behind the altar and break bread with my friends. And I can't. I could stand in my garden and do it, put it on facebook so you can see your Vicar is doing some work - but no. As I said before (without criticising anyone else) for me, communion is a shared experience, and if I can't share it with my congregation, my friends, I am not going to share it. I want to recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread - but not today. That time will come - and, of course, on the first Sunday we're open, both churches are going to want a 10 am service with their Vicar, and I can't be in two places at once. (You can give some thought about how we're going to sort that problem!). Anyway, Jesus gave them the bread and disappeared - he hasn't given us the bread, but we know he has not disappeared. This time is not easy, but Jesus has not disappeared.

Those two disciples knew they had seen him, and they needed to get back to Jerusalem and tell the others. They'd walked 7 miles already, but they were going to walk 7 miles again. "That same hour they got up" - perhaps Mrs Cleopas grabbed the bread and they ate it en route. They needed to get back to their friends, to the disciples, and tell them what they had seen, who they had met. They needed to meet. We understand.

I hope they weren't too disappointed when they got back to Jerusalem and found that the others already knew. I expect that the joy and excitement made up for the 14 miles of walking they'd done that day, and I hope someone sat them down, gave them a meal and found them a bed for the night. There's a lot to do, but pace yourselves.

My final picture is an icon. Basically I'm a Baptist at heart. My chapels are plain and simple. Now I'm an Anglican, with a few more candles and a bit of dressing up, but there are some churches which are so over-the-top that I don't really feel comfortable. St Matthew's church in Newcastle-upon-Tyne is one such church. It was in our Deanery, but not in our Deanery. They didn't do the Ordination of women, they gave the impression they didn't really approve of the rest of us, and their worship - if you think I'm High Church, you ain't seen nothing.

I first visited the church in 2013, having driven past it lots of times. It's one of those huge Anglo-Catholic churches built in the slum areas of our cities back in Victorian times, and now it stands, huge and seemingly pretty unloved in the part of town that no posh person like me would ever go. I went with the Diocesan Advisory Committee, the Church planning body, on an official visit. I was faced with entrance up a flight of stairs, and that annoyed me.

I went because we were inspecting a new icon they had had installed. We had had to give it our permission, and at the meeting I had not been convinced. Why were they spending money on a piece of art? Not really my thing, mutter mutter (you know your Vicar is very good at muttering). It was stunning. The images were painted by a Romanian iconographer Christi Paslaru.



<http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2013/09/20/newcastle-st-matthew/>

I sat and contemplated this piece of art. But it is more than that. It is an image that invites prayer, reflection, contemplation. It reminds us that when people meet with Christ in the Eucharist, that is special. Those days will come again.

It reminds us that when we share bread, we need to tell others.

It reminds us that Christ is with us - at the table, on the road, in our sitting room, in the garden, fighting with work, struggling with kids, missing our families and friends. In life and in death, Christ is with us.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.
He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

You might like to have a look at

<https://www.christianart.today/index.php>

They have a fascinating collection of art, and you can sign up to a free daily email with a picture and a Gospel passage to contemplate. Thanks Mo for pointing me in their direction. Anyone else found other sites which are helping?

Peter Barham, 25 April 2020