

Road to Emmaus Sermon for 30th April, 2017

+ A poem 'The death of loneliness' by contemporary poet Michael Glover, alludes to today's Gospel account of the road to Emmaus:

I was lonely then, with only my own whistle, threading down this lane, for company. It was then that he came, stealthy as a rising breeze. We walked together. I was in his company.

Christ's company with those walking along the road to Emmaus culminates in one of the most significant meals in the Bible. But before considering that encounter, that meal, let's turn the clock right back and think of the first meal in the Bible, when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit: 'So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.' This tale was told, over and over, a terrible reminder of the beginning of the woes that befell the human race. Through Adam and Eve's disobedience everything had gone wrong. Separated from God by their sin, unable or unwilling to effect a reconciliation, from that first meal onwards the whole of creation was subject to an endless cycle of disappointment and discontent. The sorry tale of our downward spiral continued on through the millennia, as Godfrey Rust an Ealing poet wrote:

From his first word God's efforts to communicate hardly ceased. His choice of media was comprehensive: earthquakes, winds, floods, fires, still small voices, burning bushes, tablets, parables, plumb lines, angels, donkeys, plagues and dreams, potters' wheels, handwriting on the wall, the quiet chat in the desert, the mass meeting for the reading of the Law, and then for five hundred years pouring out through prophet after prophet pleadings and promises and dire warnings that bordered on despair – in all of this the message never changed: return, be healed.

Finally it seemed God had given them up and for four centuries there was no word, just the crushing weight of military occupations, like a dowry for this nation that had married once too often with foreign gods; in the Judean hills the Maccabeans chose out their Messiahs and shook their swords at heaven for its silence. But all this time God was gathering his breath to speak his tremendous word, and when it was delivered it was squeezed out from a single human body in the only, painful way there is and laid out helpless, derelict and in the heart of nowhere. Christ was born.

About thirty three years later, today's story begins. On the way to Emmaus, its exact location now lost in the mists of time, two downcast and despairing people were walking along the road. They were still going wrong – humans always will – because they were walking in the opposite direction to Jerusalem – and they were mourning the death of the one person they had thought and hoped might finally be the Messiah the people of Israel had so badly needed throughout their sorry history. Since that first meal nothing had gone right and in Jesus of Nazareth they'd seen a glimmer of hope, but it was now snuffed out. We're told that one of those walking and talking was Cleopas and his companion may well have been his wife, Mary.

The stranger they met on the way lifted their mood as he opened the scriptures to them, so that their hearts were burning within them and they wanted to hear more. They urged him to stay with them, offering him hospitality, which he accepted. But events took an

unexpected turn when suddenly the guest became the host. He took their bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it back to them. This role reversal was for Cleopas and Mary the defining moment. They realised that the one who had been walking with them, who had held them, fascinated by his interpretation of the scriptures, was none other than Jesus who had died. Which meant he must have risen from the dead – so they were sharing a meal with someone who had defeated death. Jesus vanished, but full of the hope they thought they'd lost, Cleopas and Mary set off again immediately, going the right way this time as they rushed back to Jerusalem to tell everyone else.

Throughout his short ministry Jesus used the ordinary to make sense of the extraordinary. He spoke in parables about things people understood – vineyards, sheep, the building of houses, storage in barns, sowing seeds and coping with weeds. When he wanted to show them how to become his followers, Jesus didn't just explain, he acted out his instructions – washing feet, touching the unclean and eating meals. This was why his way of taking bread, blessing it and giving it to them had become so familiar that even when his post-resurrection body was unrecognisable, those who had eaten meals with Jesus knew that it was him. At Emmaus the simple everyday action of sharing bread took on a new significance. Cleopas and Mary were among the first to understand that Jesus' death did not mean the end, the Risen Christ was still in our midst.

Never again need human beings feel abandoned by God, as the people of Israel had felt for millennia. A simple meal in the Garden of Eden had marked the start of the downward spiral of human relations with their Creator. Another simple meal marked the complete reversal of our fortunes, the establishment of the New Covenant with God, for all time and all eternity. Since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit our sin had got in the way; without a means of forgiveness we were doomed to a slow and painful spiritual death. Now, Jesus Christ had died on the Cross but he had risen from the dead. He bore our sins in death so that we might live unburdened, and having risen from the dead, he showed us that he would be present with us at every Eucharist, offering us a share in his new life.

Which is why the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, has become central to our faith and why we re-enact the events on the road to Emmaus at every single celebration. Like Cleopas and his companion, we are travellers along the way – very often, like them, going the wrong way. We are forgiven our wrongs, we hear readings from Scripture which – on a good day – we too should find fascinating and enlightening. We offer bread for God to use, though nowadays in the west we offer gifts of money instead, to be used in God's service. Then the priest, standing in Christ's shoes, performs what is for many the central act of Christian ministry as the bread is received, blessed, broken and distributed. All those who share in the one bread become one body, the body of Christ and the service comes to a fairly speedy conclusion as we follow Cleopas and Mary and are sent out to tell others of our encounter with the Risen Lord.

There are a couple of other things to think about when we consider the central role of the Eucharist in the light of the encounter on the road to Emmaus. Firstly the Gospel is symbolically taken into the midst of the congregation to be read. This is a reminder that the Gospel holds Jesus's own words and that he walked with his followers, he was amongst them as he taught and opened their minds to the scriptures. When the Gospel has been read it's lifted high as the reader proclaims, this is the Gospel of the Lord. A short while

later this action of lifting the Gospel up high is then mirrored as the priest lifts the blessed, or consecrated bread up high too. These actions symbolise the equal importance given to word and sacrament. On the road to Emmaus it was the way the scriptures were opened to them that made Cleopas and his companion want to invite Jesus to stay on with them. They gave him bread, which he then took assuming the role of host, which is why once it's been blessed, the bread at every Eucharist is known as the host. In some mysterious way we will never fully understand, through the working of the Holy Spirit, the blessed bread has taken on the property of Christ – who we believe is in our midst as the Eucharistic host.

The simple meal which enabled Cleopas and Mary to recognise the risen Christ was essential nourishment for their journey – they'd walked some distance to reach Emmaus and they wasted no time in leaving to go back to Jerusalem with their news. They needed to eat a proper meal. The small piece of unleavened bread we consume in the Eucharist provides us with the spiritual nourishment we need, in order to continue our journey of faith and bring Christ's risen life to others. Forgiven, strengthened and nourished by the bread of life we know that we are not alone as we are sent out into the world, proclaiming Christ's Resurrection and charged with making new disciples. Amen.