

The Stranger on the Road of Despair

A sermon on Luke 24: 13-35 & 1 Peter 1: 17-23 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 April 2017

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Message

Meeting us on the road of despair, Jesus reveals to us that suffering and defeat are God's means of bringing new life and hope.

Sermon

Most of us have walked the road to Emmaus. Only a few of you have ever been near the actual ten kilometre track from Jerusalem to the village of that name, but most of you have, at some time or another walked the road that the two disciples walked in our gospel story tonight.

The road to Emmaus is the road to giving up. It is the road of disillusionment, of despair, of chucking in the towel. It is the road of turning our backs on the bright hopes of yesterday, and resigning ourselves to the shattered dreams and endless days ahead of just putting one foot in front of another with nothing much to look forward to. It is the road we trudge when everything we had invested our hopes in has gone up in smoke and so now living is nothing more than surviving. There is no meaning, no direction, no promise. Just nothing.

Whether it is a relationship failure, or unemployment, or chronic illness, or an accident or disaster, or betrayal by friends, or the inability to conquer your own personal demons that keep dragging you back to the same destructive attitudes and behaviours, most of us at some time or another – maybe now – know the defeated trudge of the Emmaus Road.

Everything we believed in is reduced to ashes and in one crushing moment, we've lost all hope that there might ever be a bright new tomorrow. Everything we thought had been promised to us has been nailed to a tree and has humiliatingly bled to death before our very eyes, and now we are leaving it behind, dead and buried, and we are heading for Emmaus, the place where the despairing go to escape from the embarrassing memory of what they naively once believed in.

But perhaps it is often the naivety of our beliefs that has to die before we can meet the truth on the Emmaus Road. I know that when I look back on my anger and despair at the failure of my first marriage, the naivety of my youthful optimism is breathtaking. I firmly believed that I could control the outcome by being my best and praying sincerely, because God would be obliged to honour that and fix everything. $A + B = C$. Quite simple really. But there was another human being who I had left out of the naive mathematics of my belief system. Any bright hopes for tomorrow built on such shonky foundations was always destined for crushing disillusionment.

And look at these two disciples in the story – Cleopas and his unnamed companion; was it his wife? How do they describe their crushed hopes? “We had hoped that this Jesus was the one to redeem Israel.” There are hundreds of years of messianic expectations lying behind that statement, and it is hard for us to pick up all the content that it implied, but the gist of it is not too hard to grasp. Along with all Israel, they were looking for a crusading warrior king who would wield the big sword in the name of God, and vanquish the foreign occupation forces and set Israel again as the dominant power of the known world. Then would Israel's wealth

and power and prestige again be secure and all the world would know that David's throne was reestablished and Israel's God was the one true God and every knee would bow. And many had come to believe that Jesus would be the one, the victorious conquering messiah. All the signs were there, and he was just biding his time until the moment was opportune.

And disciples like Cleopas and his companion had put all their eggs in this basket. They had thrown their lot in with Jesus for better or for worse, but believing only in the better. Judas was the first to give up. When he finally lost his faith that Jesus would take up the sword and seize power, he turned Jesus over to his enemies and went off and hanged himself.

And now the forces that they hoped Jesus was going to free them from have triumphed, violently and emphatically, and Jesus is dead and buried, and all of them are crushed and humiliated. Peter, James and John have gone back to their fishing. Mary is putting flowers on the grave. Cleopas and his partner are trudging back to Emmaus. It's all over. Gone. Finished. Snuffed out. Dead.

They are so thoroughly crushed that they don't even recognise Jesus when he appears. The resurrection was no trick of wishful thinking, because all wishful thinking had been extinguished. Mary doesn't wishfully mistake the gardener for Jesus; she despondently mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Cleopas and his partner don't wishfully mistake a stranger for Jesus; they despondently mistake Jesus for a stranger. Despair has blinded them to the truth. As Isaiah said, they can look and look but still not perceive. In fact, they are so blind they completely embarrass themselves by suggesting that Jesus is the most ignorant person in Jerusalem, completely ignorant of the things that have happened to Jesus himself. How embarrassing would that be?!

But it is there on the road to Emmaus, the road of despair, of giving up, that Jesus meets them. It is from the stomped down ashes of their abandoned hopes that he begins to open up to them the truth of who God is, and of what the scriptures mean, and of how God is really defeating the violence and oppression of the world. And perhaps it has to be so. Perhaps there is no other way. Perhaps our naive hopes and dreams will always make us completely blind to what God is really on about and there is no way for God to get through to us until our self-serving fantasies have been crushed and our delusions have been purged.

You see, most of us are, or have been, carrying the same sort of messianic delusions as Judas and Cleopas and the rest. For us it might not be about Israel, but we harbour similar hopes for our own little worlds. We look for, and believe that God has promised a messiah who when we give him our allegiance, will ride into our lives and set everything right, vanquishing our enemies and placing us on the throne we think we deserve. He will deal with all those things that have enslaved and oppressed us, those things "out there" that have stood in the way of us fulfilling our potential, and he will establish us in the health and wealth and prestige we were destined for. It's the same old story; the desire for a messiah who will remake the world the way we believe it should be made.

And the more nationalistic version of it is still alive and well too. How many western world Christians secretly or openly cheered recently when the USA unleashed a missile attack on "the enemy" in Syria and saw it as a strike for God's side?

Perhaps, like Judas and Cleopas, as long as we are still clinging fervently to such hopes for the messiah we think we need, we are incapable of ever recognising the messiah God knows we need. Perhaps we have to be on the road to Emmaus before we can be opened to something new. Or to something that was there before the foundation of the world, but is as yet unseen and only now being revealed at the end of the ages, as our reading from Peter's letter put it.

As Jesus puts it, if you had understood all the prophets had declared, you would have known that it was necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory. But we didn't know, because we were still interpreting the scriptures through our fantasies of victory and honour. We were still interpreting the scriptures in a way that would endorse dancing in the street over the death of our enemies, for surely our enemies were the enemies of God and we have been the instruments of God's righteous vengeance. But vengeance begets only vengeance, and God will have no part in it.

The Jesus who meets us on the road is still scarred by the violence of his death. He is simultaneously the risen Messiah and the mutilated suffering servant. He is simultaneously both dead, and more mind-bogglingly alive than any resuscitated corpse could ever be. And he is simultaneously the crushed victim, and the merciful Lord who comes to us without a shadow of resentment or vengefulness. Is this a messiah who waves the flag and dances in the street over the death of his enemies? Not a bit of it. This is the messiah who, when we were still his enemies, died for us, that we might be reconciled to God. This is a messiah who destroys enemies only by reaching out with nail scarred hands and making them friends.

This is the messiah who is so hard for us to see and recognise. This is the messiah who always comes to us as we trudge the road to Emmaus; always, whether we ever recognise him or not. For it is precisely there, amidst the dashed hopes and shattered dreams that there is a chance of getting through to us and opening our eyes to another way, to a "new" way that has existed before the foundation of the world, and to which Jesus set himself, knowing that the cost to himself would be unspeakable suffering.

For on this way, the victory of God is won not through wreaking vengeance on our enemies, but in absorbing the worst that death and violence and hostility can dish out, and rising to life again without having been reduced to toxic bitterness and resentment and vengefulness. This messiah defeats violence and hostility by sucking them out of the world by absorbing them in his own body and not reciprocating them, not giving them back. Just soaking them up and returning only gratuitous mercy and love and kindness.

This is the messiah who, if you are truly ready to let go of your old fantasies and delusions, will meet you on the despondent road to Emmaus, open the scriptures to you to reveal the ways of the suffering God, set your heart burning within you, and make himself known to you in the breaking of the bread. And when that happens, if you will welcome this beloved stranger and his strange good news, you will, as our reading from Peter's letter said, be born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. Amen.