

There and Back Again

A sermon on Luke 24:13 - 35 by the Revd Roslyn Wright, 26 April 2020

This must be one of the most frustrating stories in the bible for systematic and biblical theologians. It is a story that could have given so many answers. Just imagine what it would be like to have a record of these words of Jesus. All that teaching he gave on the road between Jerusalem and Emmaus. If those words had been recorded, we would have an account of Jesus' own understanding, post-resurrection, of who he was as the Messiah. What a field day the academics would have with that!

“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” What a wonderful exposition about Messiah-ship. What a strong witness, you would think, to the Jews of the day about Jesus' identity as Messiah. But this was not what the gospel recorded. This lesson, post-resurrection from Jesus own lips, has not been preserved.

The gospels do a pretty good job each in their own way of retelling the important things about Jesus. The things we need to remember, the things that changed the lives of people two millennia ago, and continue to change lives today. So what are we to make of this? Why don't we have the record of Jesus' own teaching about himself?

The two who walked the road with him did not recognise him in the teaching. I find that fascinating. Head knowledge about Jesus is not enough. All the good biblical study in the world is not enough. It was not enough to send them back to Jerusalem. They heard his teaching, and when they got to Emmaus they were ready to offer him a place to stay and a meal, but they did not know him still. You can't convert someone by intellectual arguments or even biblical proofs.

What was it that turned their lives around that day? What was it that sent them rushing back the seven miles to Jerusalem? We know they recognised him in the breaking of the bread. It was the recognition that turned them around, figuratively and literally, and sent them back. They recognised him. They knew him. They saw who he was. They met him in that moment. The arguments and reasonings on the road did not ultimately matter. What mattered was the encounter, the moment of recognition, the moment of presence felt and received. That was what sent them back. That was what turned their lives around for ever. Jesus was alive, and they knew it. They had met him.

The moment of recognition is a wonderous moment with someone you know and have not seen for a while. I was walking in Royal Park recently and in amongst the people also out getting exercise I saw Margie walking the dogs. It was so lovely to stop at an appropriate distance and talk face to face. My heart and my spirit was lifted. Technology and remote connection is a gift in these times, but we know it is not enough. Like the disciples in the Emmaus story we need to meet face to face, to recognise each other and the gift that we are to each other – strong and weak, broken and whole, fragile and courageous. We need each other. And when we see each other face to face there will be great joy in seeing and recognising and greeting each other.

This brings me to the second aspect of the gospel story that holds a lot of energy for me, and that is the notion of the journey. The journey metaphor has been in use around Christian

circles for a long, long time. It is metaphor that we use often. I for one am missing the freedom to journey at present. We know that this time is one in which we have a unique opportunity to make a different type of journey. As I have thought about the journey metaphor in the light of this story, I kept half-remembering quotes and sayings about journeying. One of the gifts of “Stay at Home” is time to trawl the computer, so I tracked down quotes about journeying.

Ernest Hemingway: Never go on trips with anyone you do not love.

Danish proverb: The road to a friend's house is never long.

Douglas Adams: I may not have gone where I intended to go,
but I think I have ended up where I intended to be.

Ursula LeGuin: It is good to have an end to journey toward,
but it is the journey that matters in the end.

Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I --
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The two on the road to Emmaus were making a trip together to a destination they thought would be the end of their journey, most certainly for that day. They were met by Jesus, and when they recognised him they were changed people, transformed. What had been speculation and even knowledge about Jesus, became an experience of Jesus, an encounter and engagement with Jesus. He became real.

The journey they had made was not over, it took them back to where they had come from. They returned to Jerusalem, back to where they began. But it was not the same Jerusalem, not for them. They had been changed on the journey, their lives transformed. Sadness became joy, confusion became certainty, fear was overtaken by love.

People talk about what life will be like the other side of this break in “normal”. There have been some internet posts telling us that what we had was not “normal” and we cannot return to the way we were. It wasn’t healthy for us or the planet. This journey we are making is changing us. We will come through these days and into something that is more familiar. But there will be changes that cannot and maybe should not be undone. We are exploring new territory and discovering new things, new ways, new connections. Tolkien’s story of The Hobbit is subtitled “There and back again”. Bilbo Baggins returned home, but he was not the same Hobbit who left the Shire. We too will be changed by this, and the way we make this journey now will bring its fruit on the other side.

I don’t know what the gifts of this time will be for us all in the future. But we can learn from the Emmaus travellers. Pay attention to what is happening for you as you walk this path. What is it that makes your heart burn within you? Where are you finding deeper connection

with God, yourself and others? What brings you energy and freedom? How have your priorities shifted? How do you now want to live?

I have another Tolkien quote above my desk that I put there at the start of the pandemic.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

Times of crisis can be times of change, conversion, renewal. Lives change direction. Times of crisis too can be times when the truth of someone’s soul is seen. We have seen that in the lives of politicians around the globe. This is a time we can look at ourselves and see who we are and what matters to us. We may feel despondent about the circumstances of life, but we know that as we make this journey Jesus is present, recognised or not. Listen to what is happening in your heart. Look to see how he breaks open what we need. Recognise how he comes to us in the breaking of the bread of our selves, and the breaking open of our lives to each other. Pay attention in this journey. The risen Christ is in us, in lives that are gifted and graced, flawed and fragile. Together we are Christ’s body. Together we are broken and given, to ourselves, to each other, to the world.

May you find strength for the journey. May you know that you do not travel alone. May you be graced with the gift of a heart that burns within you as you walk the way of love.