

Reflection for Easter 3 by Rev'd Michael Last

Journeys can and often are times of frustration and annoyance. They can mean hours sitting in a traffic jam, queuing passport control, security and luggage reclaim. Approaching Perth from the north on the A9 is like that at present due to road works - I believe. Cancelled or late trains – again, frustrating; so many issues here, including strikes of one kind or another. Airports are the same with passport control, security and luggage reclaim. All we want to do is get from A to B as quickly as possible, but it can be so infuriating.

On the other hand journeys, especially when time is not an issue, can be voyages of discovery, in terms not only of what you see and pass but also in terms of probing our understanding of ourselves and of our travelling companions. A journey is not simply to get from A to B, it is so much more.

Pilgrimages are often like that; it is not so much getting there that is important as what happens on the route. The way so often, in unexpected moments, the little things can challenge us and make us look at things slightly or even radically from a different perspective.

In Luke's gospel you will find a resurrection appearance that is set against the backdrop of a journey covering the distance to Emmaus - about two hours walk. Quite where Emmaus was is still a matter for debate, with several locations being suggested, but it was certainly close to Jerusalem. This was a journey that was to help two of the disciples to begin to unravel the meaning of the events of that first Easter Day - an unravelling that culminates in an almost sacramental act - the breaking of bread, and with that act the recognition of who it was they had been walking along the road with.

Try for a moment or two placing yourself in the shoes of those disciples. It is drawing towards evening on Easter Day and they began the walk home, heavy with sorrow, disappointed and in a state of bewilderment. The question buzzing around in their minds was - what does all this mean?

In his recording of this story, Luke captures so much of the human condition - ordinary people struggling, just as we do, to come to terms with the things and the ways of God. The facts are there, they know what has happened or reportedly happened, yet their world and their minds find it difficult to comprehend: that step of faith, that step of belief has not quite happened - yet.

Then along comes a stranger who joins them on the road, walking with them, probing, inquiring about the events of the last few days and explaining from scripture why they had to happen and what it all meant.

One of the fascinating facts about this story is that as they walked with Jesus, whom they knew so well, they did not recognize him. What they wanted and needed was an experience of the living God but, when it came, they did not immediately recognise it.

This is a feature that is not uncommon in the resurrection appearances: Jesus is there, but is not immediately recognised. Think of Mary in the garden. She meets Jesus and thinks he is the gardener until he calls her by name – Mary, and then she recognises him. The same is true here. It is only as Jesus blesses and breaks the bread that their eyes are opened - the penny drops - and they recognise Jesus whom they knew.

It is only at that point of recognition that they acknowledge the way their hearts have been warmed as they walked along that road. It is only looking back that it all makes sense.

The result for these two disciples is new impetus, new drive, and a total new understanding of events of the last week or so. As they walked with Jesus their lives were being transformed, being given new meaning and hope. Back to Jerusalem they go, retracing their steps with a totally different frame of mind and joy in their hearts, a spring in their steps and with a positive message for the rest of the disciples.

The narrative of the Emmaus Road is not only important in the sequence of resurrection appearances, but it also provides us with an important model around which church life should be built, especially in the areas of mission, evangelism and nurture, highlighting the fact that we are all on a spiritual journey, a pilgrimage, with each of us having reached a different point.

This is a journey that will have both its lows and its high points. There are times when we will be confused and be unable to see God; times when God will be at work although we are unaware of his presence and times too of joy and excitement as his presence becomes an illuminating reality.

Think of just one of those areas - nurture. This Emmaus journey reminds us of the need to walk alongside one another; not only in a pastoral sense, caring for each other but in terms of spiritual growth as well. Just because we are part of the church does not mean we stop growing, nor does it mean that we stop journeying: quite the opposite - a new, a fresh road appears in front of us. What this means is that those who are more mature in the faith need to learn to support and encourage those just setting out and, conversely, the enthusiasm and questioning of those new to the faith should rub off and challenge afresh those who have been faithful much longer period. We travel together.

In many ways it is good when putting a confirmation preparation group together that it includes not only those who are looking to be confirmed but also those who were confirmed many years ago. The two groups walk alongside each other.

The same is true in mission and evangelism.

What we see in the Emmaus Road story is three key steps that those disciples had to take. First, the new story, then, with Jesus' help they had to begin to understand what all the pieces of the jigsaw meant. Finally, as Jesus breaks bread, the reality hits them - fact becomes faith bringing with it new meaning and new hope.

The same is true for majority of people who come to follow Christ today. It is not something that just happens. It is a journey that may well take some time before faith becomes a living reality. They may well not be aware, as the disciples were not aware of the presence of Jesus with them, walking alongside them. This presence may well come in the form of many different individuals; it could be any of us walking alongside them, maybe only for a few steps, maybe for longer, before God gives someone else that role. But, in time, all the pieces of the jigsaw will start to fit together. Looked at in this way it makes our encounters in everyday life more critical and important.

What message are we sending out?

The reality of faith though is that it does, ultimately, change things forever. As those disciples found it brought new hope and meaning - a new reality that only struck home as *"Jesus sat down to eat with them, took the bread, and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him"*.

We journey together in faith – the Emmaus Road narrative provides a model to go back to time and again.