

4th May, 2014

Reading: Luke 24: 13 – 35

Sermon: God's presence on our Emmaus Road

I read an interesting thought on the Church of Scotland website the other day. We read in Luke's Gospel that Emmaus was situated seven miles from Jerusalem. Well, despite that information, biblical historians and cartographers, people who study maps, have been unable to decide where exactly Emmaus would have been.

In the light of that, there is the thought that Emmaus may not actually have been a real place. Emmaus or the road to Emmaus may just be a symbol for places where hopes have been quashed and dreams shattered. It may just be symbolic of places where the raw emotion of grief is felt most profoundly.

It may, of course, simply be that scholars cannot find Emmaus but even if it was a real place, it can still have that other meaning and so be understood as a symbol for a place of pain and disappointment.

The two who were on the road out of Jerusalem, on the road to Emmaus, were at their lowest ebb. They were reeling from all that had happened on what we now know as Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. They were trying to come to terms with Jesus' death and the fact that His body had disappeared from the tomb. They had heard a story of angels saying He was alive but they didn't believe it because some who had gone to the tomb hadn't seen Him.

They had hoped He would be the one to redeem Israel but now their hopes were dashed and their dreams shattered.

At some point in our lives, we have all been on the road to Emmaus. There are any number of things which can drive us towards Emmaus: family problems, a breakdown in a relationship, financial hardship, loss of earnings, ill health, bereavement, loneliness, bullying, cruelty and so on and these things can drive us not just towards Emmaus but headlong into the emotions which were experienced by the two who were on their way out of Jerusalem.

It's an incredibly difficult road to walk but once we're on that road, all we can do is keep going. There is no going back. The people on the road to Emmaus couldn't undo what had happened in Jerusalem. They couldn't turn the clock back. They couldn't take a different road because circumstances were what they were. All they could do was deal with what had happened, with they were feeling and keep going.

It was while they were on the road to Emmaus that Jesus walked with them but they were totally unaware of His presence. They knew someone was with them but they failed to recognise who it was.

It was only when they invited Jesus into their home and He broke bread with them that they realised that Jesus was actually with them. What was it about that moment that caused their eyes to be opened?

Nicola Frail, Chaplain to the 9 Regt Army Air Corps gives the following illustration:

Dr. Viktor Frankl, a Jewish holocaust survivor, once recalled: "I remember how a foreman secretly gave me a piece of bread which I knew he must have saved from his breakfast ration. It was far more than the small piece of bread which moved me to tears at the time. It was the human 'something' this man also gave to me — the word and the look which accompanied the gift."

Was it something about the word or the look which Jesus gave the people when He broke bread with them that opened their eyes to who was with them?

But then events take a different turn. No sooner are their eyes opened to allow them to see Jesus than Jesus disappears from their view.

Luke says: **Their eyes were opened, they recognised him and he disappeared from their sight.**

That is real life. I can't imagine that any of us are constantly aware of God's presence with us. What we have is His promise that He will never leave us or forsake us but that doesn't mean that we are always aware of His presence.

Nicola Frail quotes from the commentator Culpepper who says: "God's presence is always elusive, fleeting, dancing on the edge of our awareness and perception."

She goes to say remind us of a song sung by the Nuns in the Sound of Music. They sing: 'How can you catch a moonbeam in your hand, how do you hold a wave upon the sand? ...' Nicola says, "God's faithful perceive God's presence in fleeting moments, and then the mundane closes in again."

That is life. We become aware of God's presence at the most unexpected times and often in the most unlikely of places. God is not predictable but those moments of real recognition pass fairly quickly and we are left with the humdrum of daily life, with the emotions and the situations in which we find ourselves.

I doubt very much that when we come to Church we can say that we are always aware of God's presence and yet this would seem like the most likely

place to meet with God. That's not saying we won't meet God here but it may be that we have a greater sense of God on our Emmaus Road.

For us, that might be lying in a hospital bed with the fears and anxieties which surround us and our situation. It might be there that we have a strong sense of God being with us.

We could be on top of a mountain or trapped in some horrendous situation from which we feel there is no escape and sense God then. Equally, we might not but even if the people with whom Jesus sat had not recognised Him, it wouldn't have altered the fact that He was with them. He would still have been there just as He was on the road with them, without any recognition on their part.

He is with us even when we fail to realise it and that is what faith is all about, trusting that God will keep his promise to never leave us or forsake us.

Try to be aware of those fleeting moments of recognition and treasure them because those moments are partly what we draw on when our faith is challenged on our Emmaus road. Those moments when we have had a strong sense of God's presence are what we hang onto when we are struggling and have no sense of God.

It's like the hymn writer says:

Where is the blessedness I knew

When first I saw the Lord?

Where is the soul refreshing view

Of Jesus and His Word?

We have moments like that on the Emmaus road but we know too that we have been blessed by God in the past and that reality, that truth, is what we need to grasp firmly in our hearts so that on the Emmaus road, when we are unaware of our Lord beside us, we remember His presence and His promise. **I will never leave you or forsake you.**