

“We had hoped ....”

Words to a stranger on the road; words spoken by someone for whom life had turned sour, whose dreams had been shattered, who was getting out of town.

Over these last three Sundays, beginning on Easter Day, we have been reading from the Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Living as we are some 2000 years after the events, we celebrate Easter as a day of triumph, as one of undiluted joy. But as we read the Gospels, we need to remind ourselves that this was not the first reaction of the disciples. On Easter Day the women bring the news that the tomb is empty – that initially only adds to their confusion. Has someone, not content with killing Jesus, now vandalised the grave. Then there was the appearance in the Upper Room, doors locked for fear. But Thomas wasn't there – when the other disciples tell him, he just cannot believe it. In each of these cases, it is not news of the Empty Tomb that changes them – it is an encounter with the Risen Christ.

So this morning we have read of the appearance of Jesus to two men, dejected and confused by women talking of empty tombs. They have had enough, they are getting out of town. Then this stranger joins them who seems to be oblivious to the recent turn of events that has shattered their hopes, their dreams, their very lives. They begin by telling the stranger of all the hopes that they had had when they began to follow Jesus, how it all fell apart in the awful events of the previous Friday. Then the women coming in with this talk of empty tombs. Then those telling words; ‘We had hoped’.

The appearance on the Road to Emmaus is for me one of the most telling of the resurrection experiences recounted in the Gospels. It is the account of a journey, a journey from doubt to faith, a journey of encounter with the Risen Christ.

For me it is not just a journey of these two individuals – it actually mirrors my journey (and I would suspect many other people’s journey) through life – our own journey from doubt to faith, from despair, fear to hope.

There is another feature of this story as Luke tells it. The disciples on the road were not aware of who it was who was walking the road with them. As I thought about that I thought of how you and I can be Christ for each other along the journey of life. A friend of mine once suggested that at the heart of our Christian life lies the question ‘What is the basic purpose for our being here?’ This concept of “being Christ for each other” reminds me of the basic purpose and mission that must underlie all our endeavours as a Christian community and as individuals.

So what was it that marked out that journey along the road to Emmaus? There was first of all a basic honesty as these two followers of Jesus felt able to unburden all their cares. One of our deepest needs is that of being heard, of being listened to – to know that our hurt, our pain, our fears have been acknowledged by another human being. By the same token one of the greatest gifts we can give to another is to travel the road with them, listening, sharing, feeling something of their own pain.

As they went along the road, they started listening to the stranger – but only after he had listened to them. They had to know they had been heard before they could listen to him. But even here there is no dramatic break through, no sudden blinding recognition – but there is something about the stranger that holds their attention – only later, looking back do they recall their “hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

We can not only be the listening ear of Christ, we can be the lips of Christ, speaking words of encouragement, of hope to people in their hurt and pain.

As they drew close to the village, the stranger made as if to go on. The followers of Jesus invite him to stay. There is something about this man who has listened to them, as they shared their hurt and pain, who spoke into that hurt and pain and they want more. “Stay with us – it is almost evening.” Then that moment of recognition: “So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”

That for me is a lovely picture of realisation, of pieces falling into place as the followers of Jesus realise he has been with them as they travelled the road. As I often say, Easter is about far more than the empty tomb – it is about the Risen Christ present and active in the world of today, as he fulfils his promise to be with us to the very end of time.

He travels the road with us even when, in the darkness of our doubts, our worries, our fears he seems horribly absent. He is there; he is there sometimes in the stillness, sometimes in the presence of friend or stranger, listening to our hurt and pain. Sometimes he is there for others through us – may we be faithful channels of his healing, strengthening peace in the life of another as we seek to be ‘Christ for one another’ along the road of life.

May we in our own life of witness be part of the answer to that prayer of blessing I often use:

Go, and know that the Lord goes with you:  
let him lead you each day into the quiet place  
of your heart, where he will speak with you;  
know that he watches over you –  
that he listens to you in gentle understanding,  
that he is with you always,  
wherever you are and however you may feel:  
and the blessing of God Almighty,  
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit  
be upon you and remain with you always.

**Amen.**

May we, in all our weakness and inadequacy, be agents of his listening, understanding presence.