

Meeting Jesus again

Do you remember the popularity of walking around the local area during the Covid lockdowns? Mostly while maintaining appropriate social distancing, of course, but it was a way of getting out and seeing other people whilst staying safe.

I know some dogs were nearly worn out from being taken for walks so often.

People greeted each other, too – from a reasonable distance - when they passed each other, but if they were going the same way, often they'd have a bit of a chat.

It's the same bushwalking – if you pass someone, it's usually a brief 'how far to go?' from one to the other... but if you're going the same way, at roughly the same speed, then conversation ensues. The longer the walk, the greater the likelihood of an extended chat.

Humans are social creatures, after all, even the most introverted people will chat to others, sooner or later. Back when walking was the usual way to get from place to place, people would tend to travel together for company... and often for security.

We heard in our reading from Luke's gospel of two of Jesus' disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a distance of a bit more than 10km. Luke doesn't tell us why they were heading to Emmaus, but it is likely that leaving Jerusalem would have been a prudent thing to do – after all, Jesus had been put to death by the Romans at the behest of the Jewish authorities, and it was possible that they'd be coming after Jesus' followers next.

They weren't fleeing us such... just being cautious.

As they walked, Cleopas and the unnamed other disciple, were talking about everything that had happened - especially those things from Palm Sunday, through to the crucifixion, and they even pondered the possibility of Jesus' resurrection. Verses 15 and 16 tell us "As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him."

It wasn't that they didn't recognise Jesus, but they couldn't – they were prevented from recognising him in some way. Exactly how they were prevented, we aren't told.

Sometimes it's suggested that it was Jesus who kept them from recognising him in some supernatural way – but Luke doesn't say that's what happened.

Sometimes there's a more mundane explanation suggested. It was just such an unlikely thing that Jesus would choose to join them on the road. He was gone. If – and to these two it was still only an 'if' – Jesus was coming back, surely it would be in some dramatic way not simply joining two of his disciples as they walked along the road.

And maybe it was because they didn't look at him. When Jesus had died, they'd lost hope. The one they thought might be the messiah was gone – and had, it seemed – failed in his mission. They may have been looking down, they may have had tears in their eyes, they may have avoided making eye contact with this stranger. They were grieving. Grieving for their teacher, grieving for what might have been.

They weren't expecting to see Jesus. And for whatever reason, they didn't see him.

But as they walked along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus together, this apparent stranger asked them, “What are you discussing together as you walk along?”

Anyone who had been in Jerusalem on that weekend should have quickly picked up on what they were discussing – the trial and death of Jesus would have been big news. The road went from Jerusalem to Emmaus, so everyone heading this direction would have started out from the city. So when this stranger asked them what they were discussed, they were taken aback. We heard that they stood still, their faces downcast. Cleopas, asked him, “Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?” It had been big news!

But Jesus – still unrecognised – asks them. “What things?”

Cleopas and his friend gave the stranger a quick summary, “About Jesus of Nazareth... He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

It’s interesting that they called him ‘a prophet’ rather than ‘the messiah’, and that they said “...we had hoped he was the one...” despite the evidence that he was the one – the various miracles, the power over demons, the power over the wind and the waves, the fulfilment of prophecy. I suspect that, had you asked them a week before, when Jesus was riding into Jerusalem to the cheers of the crowd, they would have confidently said “... he is the one...” but now, looking back, after his death and his apparent failure, it was simply “we had hoped”.

As Luke notes, as they spoke, their faces were downcast.

They had hoped. But they didn’t anymore. Their hope was gone.

But then they tell this stranger, “...some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn’t find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus.”

They didn’t know what to make of this news – they were certainly not convinced, but they were also not prepared to dismiss it entirely. They knew Jesus was dead – if they hadn’t seen him die, they certainly knew people who had. And they knew the Roman’s reputation – there was no way the crucifixion didn’t work. It would probably be safer for them to leave Jerusalem.

Jesus then said, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”

He challenged them, and asks “Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” Yes! Jesus had to be betrayed and die in order to fulfil God’s plan.

And then, patiently, as they walk along, Jesus explained it all to them. All those Old Testament prophecies that have been fulfilled by Jesus in his life and death – and in his resurrection.

Likely things like the location of Jesus birth being Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that his ministry would begin in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2) that he would teach using parables (Psalm 78:1-2), that he would

ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9), that he would be despised and rejected (Isaiah 53:3), that he would die and his blood would be poured out for the atonement of sin (Leviticus 17:11), and so on. And on – because when you start looking, you find that there are literally hundreds of prophecies fulfilled in the birth, the life and the death of Jesus.

When they drew near to Emmaus, they were so interested in what Jesus was saying, they urged him to go with them into Emmaus, instead of continuing on his way past the town. Clearly a connection was made between Cleopas and his friend and this stranger who had these amazing insights to who Jesus was.

But still they hadn't realised. It had all been explained to them, but they didn't 'get it'. That's one of the things I keep coming back to when I talk to people about Jesus – it's just not about knowing things about Jesus, or about knowing good arguments for who Jesus is, it's about knowing him in our hearts. Taking that leap of faith to trust in him. And be changed by him.

That idea is put eloquently by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18 "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Cleopas and his friend had heard all the evidence, and now they invited Jesus to join them in Emmaus.

We read that, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." A fairly normal thing to do... but on this occasion it was special, because "Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him".

This fellow who had been walking with them for hours, sharing the story of the messiah from Moses and the prophets all the way to the crucifixion to the resurrection, was that messiah. Was the very same Jesus who was dead and was now alive again.

They met Jesus again in that moment.

And then, after that moment of realisation, he was gone.

But what Luke records is not that they were surprised or disappointed that Jesus vanished from their sight, instead he tells us that they asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

I think it's often like that for people today, too. People today are kept from seeing Jesus. And from listening to him. For all sorts of reasons.

People can feel insignificant. Why would Jesus bother with me? People wonder. I'm not worthy. I've got nothing to contribute.

And people don't look for him. Why would people go looking for Jesus today? People in St Ives and surrounds live pretty good lives, after all. There are exceptions of course, but we're mostly well-off, mostly pretty comfortable. Why would they bother to worry about Jesus or what he might have to say to them.

These days of course, some people who claim to be Jesus' followers don't have a good reputation in society, and people will avoid getting to know Jesus, because they don't want to be involved with people like that.

Even for us who are followers of Jesus, we can so easily be distracted from hearing what he has to say to us. Distractions are all around us.

On Easter Sunday, in church we had the story of the two Marys meeting Jesus outside the tomb, and last week our gospel reading was the disciples meeting Jesus in a locked room. Each of those people met Jesus again unexpectedly, their grief and despair was swept away – giving way to joy and hope and strength. Today, Cleopas and the other one on the road to Emmaus met Jesus again and their despondency gave way to inspiration to serve the Messiah, and they immediately ran back to Jerusalem to tell others the good news!

After meeting Jesus again, the Emmaus road disciples, “...got up and returned at once to Jerusalem”. Remember this was at night! And remember, Jerusalem was probably a dangerous place for them. But they went anyway!

They went back to Jerusalem, where we read that “There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

They recognised him when he broke the bread. We tend to jump immediately to the last supper, and our service of Holy Communion when we read that, but really, I think it was just an everyday thing – the disciples ate with Jesus throughout his ministry, at the end of the day, sitting down together for a meal, breaking bread and sharing it would have been completely normal.

I like that it was in that moment that they recognised Jesus, because we can all recognise Jesus in the small things in life. Sometimes we recognise Jesus in the big things, of course, but sometimes it's in the quiet moments: The sharing of fellowship. A hand on the shoulder. A cup of tea offered. A hug of comfort. A favour done. Some bread broken and shared.

When we're going through dark times in our lives, it's often those small things that get us through. It's often in those small things we meet Jesus again.

And when we're not in dark times, we can share those small things with others. We can show Jesus to others.

As we look to the future – a future that won't be like the past – we all have a part to play in helping people to meet Jesus in their lives. Whether its here, or where we live or at the shops or wherever.

Sometimes we will feel alone. Those two disciples on the road to Emmaus certainly did – but they found that Jesus had been with them along the way.

Let's all be aware that Jesus is with us all the way, and be prepared to meet him again.

Amen.