

Date: 04/18/2021

The Road To Emmaus

Texts: **Isaiah 51: 11-16**; **Luke 24:23-35**; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones *The Path To True Happiness*

A man and his followers wade into a shallow river at a point where it is about 10 feet across. It's a tiny river, slow, muddy, more of a stream than anything. Many people crossed it every day. For most of them, doing so was an inconsequential thing. But for this man, when he stepped out on the other side of that river, it was a turning point in history. The man was Julius Caesar, and the river was the Rubicon. The Rubicon marked the northern limits of Italy, and no general was allowed to cross it into Italy under arms with his troops. Julius Caesar had just declared war on the Senate of Rome, and the ensuing Civil War would put an end to the 460 year old Roman Republic and mark the beginning of the Roman Empire, which lasted another 460 years.

The mere fact of Caesar crossing the Rubicon was unremarkable. People crossed it every day. But the significance of that act changed the history of the Western World. We can know all the facts without realizing what they mean.

Another scene: two men and a woman stand in front of a crowd. One of the men drones on about the importance of institutions, while the other man and the woman seem to mostly ignore him. Then the first man starts interrogating the second man. He asks him questions, to which the second man must give an answer. The second man seems very nervous. He won't look at the first man, but stares at the woman. When the first man is satisfied with the second man's answers to the questions, he tells the second man to parrot his words. People in the crowd strain to hear what they are saying. When the first man, who seems to be in authority, is finished with the second man, he turns his attention to the woman, whom he likewise interrogates. She also refuses to look at the first man. Instead she looks to the second man, as if for reassurance. The first man then tells the woman to repeat what he is saying. When she is done, the first man tells the second man that he may kiss the woman. She is now his wife.

The mere facts of the wedding ceremony can be retold without giving much of a hint as to what it all means. But now, two people will live together, perhaps have children together, hopefully will grow old together. Their lives have been changed, legally and personally, by what happened on that one day.

Two disciples were walking along on the road from Jerusalem to the small village of Emmaus, about seven miles away. They probably expected the journey to take about 2.5 hours. Jesus walks up behind them. For some reason they don't recognize him. Jesus asks them what they are talking about, and they ask him if he's the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't what's happened there in the last few days. Jesus asks, "What's happened?" The two disciples tell Jesus some facts about himself: Jesus was a prophet, powerful in word and deed. The chief priests and rulers handed him over to the Romans to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him. He was put in a tomb. Some women went to the tomb, but didn't find his body. They said they saw angels who said Jesus was alive. Some others went and confirmed that the tomb was empty. They saw no angels, and found no body. Those are the facts.

That is what happened. But they don't understand what it means at all. They have no context, no framework for figuring out what's important.

And that's where Jesus, walking with them but hidden from their recognition, starts to give them the context they need to understand what has happened. The whole scene is filled with this wonderful dramatic irony. Jesus knows better than anyone who he is and what happened to him, but the two disciples ask him if he's the only person in Jerusalem who doesn't know. The two disciples tell us twice that the tomb was empty, and that no one had seen Jesus. The irony is, Jesus is right there with them, and they don't see him either! In fact, even though they are Jesus' disciples, they have never really seen him for who he is. They know some facts about him, but the significance of his presence has been hidden from them. So the risen Jesus, who has about 2 hours to talk with them, explains how the Messiah had to suffer and die, according to Moses and all the prophets.

Perhaps Jesus mentioned Genesis 3, where God tells the tempting serpent that the offspring of the woman will one day crush his head. Or perhaps he mentioned some verses from Psalm 22: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me? I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. But God has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one. God has listened to his cry for help." Perhaps he reminded them of the words of Isaiah 53: Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities." We have no idea what Jesus told them in those two hours, but whatever it was, it touched them deeply. Later, as they reflected on it, they say to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

The facts of Jesus life and death were put into the context of God's story with Israel and with humanity. With each reference from the Hebrew Scriptures, the two disciples saw more and more significance in the events that had taken place. They still don't recognize that Jesus is with them, but they are beginning to see why, of all the people that ever lived, Jesus is the one for whom the idea of resurrection makes the most sense. It's the only fitting way for God to continue the story that God has been telling all these years.

By the time they get to Emmaus, it's almost evening. And they decide to invite the stranger into one of their homes and serve him a meal. In spite of their grief, in spite of the long journey, in spite of everything, they still manage to see the needs of the stranger, and to offer him hospitality for the night. They might not have seen Jesus clearly, but they definitely absorbed his teachings. It was only when they were sitting at the table with Jesus, and sharing a meal that they finally recognized him. If you listen closely to the words of the text, you will understand why: "Jesus sat at the table with them, and he took the bread, and after having given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them."

It's a repetition of the last supper, and it is our communion liturgy! If he hadn't disappeared from their sight, he might easily have added, "This is my body, given for you, do this in remembrance of me!"

As soon as they see him, he disappears from their sight. It's like that phenomenon of human sight: our peripheral vision is more sensitive to light than our straight ahead vision, so we see something out of the corner of our eye, and when we turn to look directly at it, it disappears.

No one even knows where Emmaus was nowadays, and it doesn't really matter, because this story of the two disciples is more about the journey than about the destination. The only reason that they can finally recognize Jesus at the end is because they have learned to see who he is while they travelled along with him. And that is our story, too. We can learn the facts about Jesus and his life, we can even learn where there are prophecies of the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures, and we can learn the facts of Jesus death, and the story of his resurrection. But even with all that, there's a good likelihood that we won't see him walking beside us. It takes a lifetime of journeying with Jesus, of listening to his teaching, of trying to carry out his commandments to love, of seeking to offer help and hospitality to strangers, before our eyes may at last be opened.

We too have heard the stories of the women at the tomb, and of the disciples who raced to see what was going on. We have heard the stories of his appearances to Mary and to Peter and to the other disciples. But it takes a lifetime of journeying with Jesus to recognize his presence in our midst. Perhaps we come closest here at the table in our communion service. In the breaking of the bread, we might just catch a fleeting glimpse of Jesus out of the corner of our eyes before he disappears from sight again. And then we do what the two on the road did: we go and tell others what we have seen and experienced of the risen Jesus walking in our midst, and tell of the times when our hearts burned within us because some part of us knew that Jesus was at our side.

Amen