Sermon for 3rd of Easter Year A

Readings: Acts 2: 14a, 32-41; Luke 24:13-35

i

As I write this the news that Boris Johnson has pulled out of the contest to replace David Cameron as prime minister has just come through. Many of Boris’ supporters are stunned, some are in tears. As the pin-up boy for the victorious Brexit campaign he was the one many had pinned their hopes upon to bring some real change to the direction of Britain and thereby possibly the whole of Europe. We shall see how events turn out, but supporters of Donald Trump may be a bit disquieted also by this news. Heroes upon whom you set your hopes do not always stay the course. History is littered with such broken heroes. Jesus was very nearly one of them.

There are still some who suggest that the apostolic witness to the resurrection of Jesus was no more than Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and wishful thinking. The theory goes that collectively they had bought in to the Jesus dream so thoroughly that they could not let it go and so created the myth of the resurrection to escape the devastating reality. The story of the two on the road to Emmaus is one of several passages that dispel such nonsense. They were devastated and they had given up hope:

“We had hoped…” they began - yes we have all known that feeling.

Many of us have hoped in things, causes, people, and know what it is to have ruefully discovered our hopes have been ill-founded. The gospels do not try to hide the fact that the disciples ran away from the cross, or that Mary mistook him for the gardener, or that one of their inner circle betrayed him, or that the religious experts rejected him, or that these two on the road to Emmaus – thought by many to have been relatives of Jesus – failed to recognise their own nephew. There was no wishful thinking. There was only pain, bewilderment, fear and a sense of failure.

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Then a young man joins them on their walk to Emmaus. They recognise that he is a visitor to Jerusalem, either deducing it from the fact that he was walking away from the city like they were, or through recognising a Galilean accent.

Whether we accept the Catholic and Orthodox traditions that Cleopas was the brother of Joseph or not, these two on the road to Emmaus were part of the inner core. They knew of the events among the disciples of earlier that day and had witnessed the women coming to report that the tomb had been found empty and angels had pronounced Jesus alive. They later show that they knew exactly where to go to find the hidden disciples back in the city. Yet still they failed to recognise him.

So Jesus then explains the scriptures to them in a new way. The Jewish people had all the right pieces of the jig saw, but they were not putting them together correctly. Jesus reveals the hidden picture the various pieces of their religious tradition makes when assembled in the right way. They had a belief in a Messiah; they had a belief in resurrection. Jesus adds to that mixture their tradition of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah to explain the crucifixion’s meaning and why is had been necessary for the Christ to suffer before entering his glory (24:26).

In retrospect they say how their hearts burned within them as he was explaining the scriptures as they walked (24:32).

Yet so far this was only an exciting possibility. It contained the seed of a new hope; it offered an exciting new interpretation of Jesus’ devastating death. But at that stage it was only that: a theory; the possibility of a way out of their despair. But great theories don’t cut it alone. So they may have been excited with their hearts burning within them at the possibility of what might be – but they still continued on their way home. They continued to resume their old lives and dream of what might have been. On they walked to dinner, no doubt fascinated by this young man’s understanding of the scriptures, but at that stage it was still only a possible theory, a wild dream – despite having heard about the empty tomb. If they were going to “invent the myth” of the resurrection you would have thought they would have started at this point. There is no evidence they did. They just went on their way back home to Emmaus.

So what made the tantalising theory the solid foundation of a new world faith? What made them later turn round on their heels and head straight back to Jerusalem?

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The answer to that question is straight before our eyes – if we can see it. I say if, because the disciples from Emmaus had Jesus right in front of their eyes, but did not recognise what they were beholding. We too may know the theory of Christian faith – and even find it exciting and attractive like they did, but for many people Christian faith never becomes more than a nice sounding theory, a good idea, an if-only sort of dream.

Paul tells us that we all ‘live and move and have our being’ in God and that no one is far from God – but the philosophers of the Areopagus couldn’t see that, just like so many people today are not aware of God’s presence in, through and around them (Acts 17:28).

So if knowing the theory and being in the presence of God are not sufficient to change theory into faith – what was it?

We see what it was in Emmaus. It was when Jesus broke the bread as they had seen him do before that they recognised it was Jesus. Realising it was Jesus himself turned the young man’s heart-warming theory into glorious reality. It was no longer an attractive possibility, but a convincing reality.

The bedrock of Christianity is the historic fact of the resurrection. Remove that and the whole edifice collapses like a pack of cards. Paul and the early apostles knew that if we have hoped in Christ for this life only, we are most wretched of people (1 Corinthians 15:19). The resurrection faith is based on fact or it is based on nothing.

Peter starts his Pentecostal address in our other reading today with this fundamental assertion and this is why I have taken the liberty of extending the set lectionary reading by a few verses:

“God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact” (Acts 2:32).

That is the starting point of Christian faith. Not that a new theory was born; not that a new story was told; but that something new happened. No other foundation is strong enough to bear the weight of the Church and all those who have responded to the preaching of the Gospel.

It is the historic fact of the resurrection that provides the solid rock upon which the new house of the Lord can be built. Wishful thinking, apostolic PTSD, or sub-apostolic conspiracy theories would be to build on sand. As Gamaliel famously said to the Sanhedrin, if there’s nothing to this, it will soon pass away (Acts 5:38-39).

Thankfully, the two from Emmaus did recognise Jesus. Thankfully they did immediately understand the significance of the story the young man had explained to them on the walk home before they knew it was Jesus himself explaining the scriptures to them. Theory and fact and recognition had to come together to produce faith.

But there is one detail in this story of doubt and lack of understanding turning into faith and comprehension that I find a little haunting. “Jesus acted as if he were going on” (24:28).

If Jesus was the risen Lord walking with them along the road, and if his interpretation of the scriptures was true, and if the two were members of the inner core of followers, would Jesus have really walked on had they not invited him in?

If the answer is yes, he would have – then we see the crucial role of faith and human response in salvation. The Gospel was still as true had they not invited him, but only by doing so did they gain further opportunity at the meal to recognise finally that it was Jesus with them and thereby the theory turned instantly into fact and upon their recognition, into faith.

For the Gospel to be true for them required a willingness to respond; they had to invite Jesus in. The obvious Eucharistic overtones as Jesus broke the bread suggest perhaps that Luke is telling us that it is in the mysteries of worship that faith can spark into life.

Wesley for one would surely rejoice in such an interpretation for he believed receiving holy communion could be a means of finding faith and so should not be restricted to those who are already active and faithful members of the Church. So to this day, Methodists practise the ‘open table’ and invite all who love, and by implication, all those who would like to love the Lord Jesus may come and receive.

For fact remains fiction until it has become fact for you. This is conversion; and no amount of heart-warming theory or erudite scholarship will bridge that gap, however sound, without that essential leap of faith that stops Jesus from walking on to others, but invites Jesus in to home and heart. Perhaps they still didn’t know what they were doing when they invited Jesus in – but their invitation led to understanding and to faith and to salvation.

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