

The gospel story today is one of the most important for the church in every age. Two of Jesus' circle of disciples, who are at least close to the 12, are walking to Emmaus, a village some 7 miles from Jerusalem. It is Easter day and all of Jerusalem seems to be full of the news that Jesus, the "Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" had been crucified, dead and buried. Somehow, the stranger who falls in with them, does not seem to have known this. Clearly, it is on everyone else's lips.

Then, the disciples share another piece of news which is troubling them, and which they can't comprehend. Some others of the group of disciples had found Jesus' tomb empty that very morning. A vision of angels had told the women disciples that Jesus was alive, although the men had not seen this. Cleopas and the other disciple walking along are confused and in despair. We don't know why they're going to Emmaus, it seems that at least one of them lived there? Perhaps, after the death of their leader, they were simply wandering dejectedly home?

The stranger doesn't react with disbelief, however. The story in Luke's gospel doesn't focus on whether the events of the resurrection are true or not. What is in focus is the down heartedness of the disciples. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel", they mutter. Their hopes have been dashed and the whole project of the liberation of Israel seemed in tatters, with the apparent death of the Messiah.

The stranger reacts by turning their despair upside down. He scolds them for their lack of belief in the Prophets and then he explains that the Messiah, the Saviour of Israel, never was going to be the kind of Saviour who uses military or magical might to liberate Israel. What the disciples have tried to do is lock Jesus into a tiny box of their own design. They knew what kind of Messiah they wanted and Jesus had to fit this. When he didn't, they were plunged into despair.

This is the first time Jesus has called himself "Messiah" in the Gospels, but here he claims the title in verse 26. He explains that the only kind of Messiah who can "redeem Israel" is one who doesn't rely on conquest, in earthly terms, but one who ensures that suffering and defeat have no ultimate significance. When we are sure of a loving God waiting for us beyond earthly death, then suffering cannot end with the final victory of death, but with a new beginning into a greater life. Jesus turns out to be far bigger and quite unlike the disciples' small visions. That is the first lesson for the church in all times.

The 2nd lesson is related and is to do with what Jacob experiences in Genesis 28, when he sleeps in a desert place and has a vision. He sees angels ascending to, and descending from, heaven and he hears God promising him the gift of land and descendants. Jacob awakes and says, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it", "how awesome is this place." In the ordinary places, God is revealed as being fully present. Reality is not what we see with our eyes, it is much bigger and it is full of God. The disciples going to Emmaus only recognise this after two events.

Firstly, the Scriptures are interpreted to them – “did not our hearts burn within us while he was opening the Scriptures to us?”, they say. The disciples have heard the Scriptures and been open to what they were saying. They have received the good news of God’s plan for humanity. They have been moved, but still not recognised Jesus.

As the disciples turn select to their home Jesus, the stranger, makes as if to go on. He is journeying away from Jerusalem (his work there is done) and out into the world. He has a journey to make and a destination beyond the confines of the disciples’ small world. The disciples beg him to stay, they are so moved. So, Jesus eats with them and breaks the bread. In the sharing of bread and wine, finally, the disciples recognised Jesus. In the ordinary home, around the everyday meal table, in plain bread and wine, Jesus is there. They finally understand and Jesus vanishes from their sight. This is not the end of the story though, but a new beginning.

The disciples don’t stay at the table for the rest of their lives. Jesus doesn’t allow himself to be caged up by them. Jesus continues his journey and the disciples are no longer full of despair, but hope. They have seen Jesus alive, seen he is waiting there for them, seen that he has work for them. They are excited and, like Jesus, they set out on a journey “in that same hour.” It doesn’t matter that it is dark and the time to sleep. They run straight back to Jerusalem and share the Good News with the other disciples.

The 2nd lesson for the church is that the communion we have witnessed in the story, the re-enactment of the Last Supper, is not a thing in itself. It is part of the process of discipleship. Bread and wine are shared, the Scriptures are read and interpreted and Jesus is revealed in the ordinary places of our lives. This is then followed by going out to share this Good News; that God is here and that death is no longer the end of life. It is news that is taken to those who are in doubt and confusion. Jesus is alive forever.

Unless we journey beyond our limited visions of Jesus, then we will remain with the dejected Cleopas and his companion trudging along the road to Emmaus. We will never be the church of Jesus Christ. We will remain inside and permanently confused. Luke and Acts of the Apostles are a two-volume work and it is no coincidence that this last chapter of Luke, and the sharing of the Good News, is followed in Acts chapter 1 by the story of Pentecost and the giving of God’s Holy Spirit.