

17 January 2007

Luke 24, 13-35

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

What are you hoping for?

It is now the middle of January and Christmas with all of its excitement seems a long time ago. If your home is like ours, the Christmas decorations came down some time ago and the house now looks a lot barer than it did with even just a few decorations in place, including the smallest tree we have ever had.

If we cast our minds back we remember the excitement we all felt. We watched, with joy, the great production in this room by the children and some of the adults, when they retold the story of the fourth wise man. We remember singing the great carols of Christmas together and also coming here one cold Friday evening to listen to Titilayo singing at her fantastic concert of Christmas songs. We were all hoping for a great Christmas, especially after singing the 12 days of Christmas.

I know that I remember the excitement of going back to Edinburgh to spend a few days with the family before my son and daughter along with their spouses came here for New Year. All the food we ate, the drinks we had, the company we shared.

All now a distant memory; and we might even wonder if it really happened, if it wasn't for the odd decoration found down the back of the settee and the lack of money in the bank.

This morning we meet with two of Jesus' followers walking towards Emmaus recorded in Luke as taking place the day of Jesus' resurrection. Two of Jesus' followers walking along in confusion. We don't know much about them, other than one was called Cephas and in our translation of the bible we are informed they are walking towards Emmaus.

What we might recognise is that they were depressed and upset. They were confused and they were discussing the events of the last week, and trying to make some sense out of what had happened in such a short time. The triumphal entrance into Jerusalem was so quickly followed by the cross. The moment of glory and recognition followed directly by bewilderment and fear. They were unsure of what was ahead, of what they should hope for.

A little like Christmas – a great build up followed by a let down.

Two men travelling towards Emmaus. Emmaus, Luke explains, is about 10 kilometres from Jerusalem. Here we discover a problem. If we look at our atlases we will see that there is no Emmaus 10 km from Jerusalem.

Some scholars believe that the village called Emmaus in our translation is in fact a village called Kubeibeh, some 10km from Jerusalem, whilst others believe it may have been Mozah in the same vicinity. Other locations such as Abu Ghosh, Colonia, Imwas and Cleopas are all suggested as the village mentioned by Luke.

I would like to share another theory with you this morning.

One of the oldest versions of the Gospel of Luke, reads "Oulammaus" instead of Emmaus. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament scriptures, Oulammaus was the fictional place where Jacob was visited by God in his dream, while sleeping on a rock. Oulammaus was not a real place name at all.

If this view is correct then there was no town of Emmaus, the two disciples were heading nowhere.

Two disciples in shock and confusion, without hope heading absolutely nowhere, and how can we blame them? They were frightened, their leader had been crucified. They were no longer popular, but rather, hunted men. Anyone who had been associated with Jesus was under threat. So we meet two totally confused men discussing the events of the past weeks and trying to find some meaning – then they meet Jesus.

Of course, we look at this story with the benefit of hindsight and 2000 years of Christian tradition and smile at the two disciples. The truth is so obvious to us. As Jesus points out to them as he walks along with them, still unrecognised, the clues were all there for them to read in the Old Testament. Everything was foretold in the words of the Prophets and Jesus had spent 3 years trying to explain it all to them and to put the writings into context.

So easy for us, or is it? Do we never feel lost and are we always absolutely clear of where we are heading and what is ahead of us?

I suspect that you are all like me when we look towards the future. I am often unsure of where I should be going or what the road ahead holds for

me and my family. A year ago, if you were to tell me that I would now be living in Munich with two children married, I would have thought you were on some sort of medication. When I left the army 9 years ago where I had been an aircraft engineer, I would have been amazed that I now build astronomical telescopes. If a few years ago you were to tell me that I would be standing here preaching to this community I would not have believed you.

We are all unsure of the road ahead and where we are heading – until Jesus comes along beside us and we recognise him.

Jesus revealed himself to the two as they went through the simple act of sharing food. The two immediately recognised Jesus as he shared bread in the same way as he had done in the upper room with bread and wine and as he had done on the hill side with the loaves and the fish.

So, let us consider this moment of change; this moment of realisation. The instant that the disciples realised who the stranger really was. How did they feel? What were their emotions?

It must have felt as though some weight had been lifted from their shoulders. Sharing the bread with Jesus has reminded them of the strength and assurance that life with Jesus offered. They had experienced it for 3 years as they followed him. They had forgotten it during the 3 days whilst Jesus was in the grave.

They had listened whilst Jesus proclaimed the facts of the prophecies and his life, death and resurrection during their walk. Jesus had put into perspective the facts that they knew, but had never really understood.

They had even told the stranger that they had heard that Jesus had risen, but clearly did not believe it.

The appearance of Jesus led to the two regaining their faith and going immediately to the others to share what they had witnessed.

Two depressed and confused people had become two enthusiastic individuals full of faith and of hope after walking with Christ.

And what of us after Christmas when all the hope of the season has passed us by? When we are in the middle of January and we can hardly remember the New Year's resolutions we made on the 1st January let alone carry them out. Resolutions we make during the hope and enthusiasm of a New Year's celebration.

Jesus shared a meal with his friends and this shared hospitality broke down the barriers. We need to do something to start breaking down barriers and building relationships. Sharing a meal or a tea or a coffee with someone can be start.

Perhaps we should also remember the times when we walk and talk with Jesus. The disciples did not recognise Jesus when he walked alongside them. I suspect that there are times when we forget that Jesus is walking alongside us, wherever we choose to walk.

When the disciples finally recognised Jesus their hope for the future returned. Things fell into place and they realised that they had a future. With Jesus we also have hope, no matter what situation we find ourselves in.

Last week Caro talked about prayer and the need for us to develop conversations with Jesus, not necessarily in flowery language, but just in ordinary conversation, just as the disciples did. That way we maintain our relationship with him and we retain our hope.

This is what we need to do when we are lost and without hope, as well as when we try and maintain our relationship with Christ.

I remember I was at a Christian Convention called Spring Harvest, a time when thousands of Christians get together in UK. I heard a minister, the youth minister to the Bishop of Bristol talking of his experience. His young son had died and both he and his wife were devastated. They seemed to have lost their faith and he was unsure he could continue as a minister, so they turned to the Bishop for advice. The advice from the Bishop was to keep saying his prayers and leading worship, because God would be with him. The minister did as he was advised, even although his heart was not in it and he felt like a fraud. Some months into this he met Christ again and everything fell into place. If he had walked away we do not know what the result would have been. He kept faithful to his calling, followed the Bishop's advice, and found the path that lay ahead of him. He may have been treading water for some time, but at least he was in the right water!

The youth minister had been supported by his Bishop, probably, being English, over a cup of tea and a time of fellowship. He was also supported by his parishioners as he worked his way back to find his faith, faithfully leading worship each week. I am sure that both the Bishop and the parishioners and friends prayed for him, even while he himself felt incapable of communicating with God. An example we can all follow.

For most of us, our loss of faith has possibly been a slight detour, for some much more. A time where our path and the path that Christ has laid before us diverges and we regain our hope through the help and support of our friends and the knowledge that Christ walks with us. These are the times when we need our friends, but it is also the time when we need to talk quietly to Christ and like the followers share the joy of meeting Christ.

Our aim is not to do the same as the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the two who were walking aimlessly towards nowhere. They were unsure of how to find the hope they had lost. But, once they had recognised the resurrected Christ, they immediately rushed to see the other disciples and share the good news with them. Sharing their experience to help others. Our aim is to maintain our focus and trust that Christ walks with us on our journey and be clear in our hope.

We can maintain our hope by meeting with our Christian Brothers and Sisters in fellowship. We can maintain our hope by keeping close to God in prayer, by having a continuous chat with him. We can maintain our hope by working through the tasks that Christ lays ahead of us.

Walking the rough road
back from Jerusalem,
the air heavy with our disappointment,
with sadness, loss, regret.
("Where is the one who should redeem Israel?")
We were aware of the stranger
matching his footsteps to our own.

How could we guess
that this unrecognised companion
would yet reveal himself
in such a simple action
as the sharing of a loaf of bread?

So, at the beginning of this year, while we remember who brings us hope, we should confirm our commitment to Christ as we share the words along with many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world.