

*We had hoped...*

In the name of the Father...

What a stroke of genius it was by the compilers of the lectionary to assign this gospel to the evensong of Easter Sunday. Just as on Palm Sunday we encountered the disciples lingering nervously on the outskirts of Jerusalem at the very moment we were ourselves standing poised at the outset of Holy Week, so now we encounter the disciples on the road to Emmaus, miles from Jerusalem, just as we too are at last able to pause for a moment and catch our breath. There is something consoling simply in being able to step back from the overheated activity of Jerusalem and the resurrection appearances and join these two disciples as they walk along slowly and philosophically, turning over what they have seen and talking with each other.

And, if you will forgive my presumption, I wonder if there is another way these two disciples are a fitting stand in for we who are gathered here this evening. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I have taken the liberty of assuming that the kind of person who comes to evensong on Easter Sunday is likely to be a person for whom the great drama of Holy Week is not exactly a new experience, for whom, as they say, this is not our first rodeo. While the young and eager may be off somewhere sobering up, here we are getting back to the routine business of praying the Office, reading the scriptures, and offering the world to God in prayer.

And that is precisely why these two disciples are such a fitting stand in for us. Because the remarkable thing about this story of the road to Emmaus is that these two downcast disciples *already know about the resurrection*. The story of Emmaus is not just one more resurrection appearance in which the risen Christ appears to the shell-shocked witnesses of his passion. The disciples to whom the stranger appears on the road are two individuals to whom the resurrection of Jesus has already been proclaimed. We even find them proclaiming it themselves, albeit in a half-hearted sort of way, to the stranger who walks beside them. "Some women of our group", they say, "went this morning to the tomb and found it empty and saw a vision of angels who said he was alive". And yet here they are looking sad. And not only do they already know about the resurrection, but Jesus himself is walking beside them, and yet they don't recognise him.

In other words, these are two disciples who are quite decidedly, in Dante's famous phrase, "nel mezzo del cammin", that is "in the middle of life's journey" in the middle of the journey of faith. Knowing the truth of the resurrection, it somehow fails to move them. Though Jesus walks beside them they have ceased to recognise him. And it doesn't take an awful lot of imagination for us to recognise the atmosphere of this beleaguered and rather bewildered walk to Emmaus. It is the atmosphere that all of us find ourselves in from time to time in our walk with Christ, and for many of us, for *most* of the time. In fact, it would not be too much to say that the atmosphere of the Emmaus road is the *normal* atmosphere of the journey of Christian discipleship.

And that is why what happens in this story is of such great interest for us. Because if the disciples on the road to Emmaus are a more than usually accurate stand in for us, then the problem they face in recognising the risen Jesus, is liable to be the problem we also face, whether we recognise it or not. And it doesn't take a genius to see what that problem is. Put simply, the reason the two disciples fail to recognise the risen Lord is that they have substituted a settled *idea* of who Jesus is meant to be for the real thing. So intently have they been trying to see Jesus as the Messiah they hoped for, that they have failed to recognise him as the Messiah he actually is: the Crucified and Risen Lord.

What the disciples on the road to Emmaus confront us with, then, is not so much the solution to a problem, as a more than usually pointed question. What the disciples on the road to Emmaus force us to ask ourselves is who is the Messiah that we have substituted for the Risen Lord, what is the shorthand, the paraphrase, of the gospel we have put in place of the real thing, what is the discipleship we have substituted for the liberating, bewildering and always freshly demanding business of following the Risen Lord?

If am even half right in my assumption, then there will be some among you here this evening who, for whatever reason, today's festivities have left you cold, for whom the proclamation of the Resurrection has not been what you had hoped. And perhaps this will not have been the first Day of Resurrection that this has been the case. To you, then, in the spirit of the stranger on the road to Emmaus, let me humbly suggest, that you look again. Amen.