

Easter III, 25th April 2020

Acts 2:37-41; Luke 24:13-35

The Road to Emmaus

I saw a great cartoon this week, set some months in the future. Lockdown is over! Normality has resumed. The churches are open. A couple are sat in church, listening to the sermon. The vicar is giving it full belt. One whispers to the other: 'it is wonderful being back, but I do miss not having a mute button, or being able to fast-forward.'

I am sure no such unworthy thought has ever crossed the mind of people in this parish. The cartoon does though prompt some interesting thoughts: assuming we ever can, why should we go back to church again? Why couldn't we do it like this – online? Why should you have to turn up in a particular place and a particular time? We value freedom and flexibility in every part of life: why should church be the exception? You can pray on your own, read the Bible on your own, these days you could listen to all the sermons you could possibly want and more on your own – and indeed, they'd probably be better sermons in many ways than the poor offering here. You could have the kind of music you like, done to the very highest standards, streamed into your living room; you could even have a sort of congregation. Some churches are doing coffee time via Zoom after these online services: if it goes on much longer, perhaps we'll even get round to it here.

So why go back? Some of us course will want to: we love the habit, we love the people being really there, not just on a screen, we love the building, we love receiving the bread and wine and not just watching it. It would be almost inconceivable not to go back. But we wonder Perhaps that's just a matter of taste? Perhaps there are people who just *like* going to church, and it doesn't make them better or worse Christians, it's just a different way? After all, you don't have to go to church to be a Christian, do you?

Most of the time, when people ask that question, the only socially acceptable answer is to nod and say, of course, that's right. You don't have to go to church to be a Christian. And at several different levels that is of course true. Right now, none of us are going to church, and I guess we're all still Christians. Even in normal times, there might be very good reasons for some of us why going to church isn't a possibility. And of course there are some who *could*

come to church, but choose not to – but who are, nevertheless, serious about following Jesus, believe that He is the Son of God and try to obey his commands. It would take a peculiar kind of arrogance to say that just because they don't come to church, they're not Christians.

However, all those qualifications duly noted, we also need to get real. There may be exceptions, there may be qualifications and nuances, but normally speaking, it would be an *extremely* odd kind of Christian who didn't come to church regularly. Being a Christian isn't just another word for being a nice person, or even for having a vague sense of God. Being a Christian means becoming closer and closer to Christ, means your life revolving more and more around His. Means in some way coming to know him, and being changed by him. And whilst that can no doubt happen in different ways, the normal way it happens is in the church.

What, you might reasonably ask, does any of this have to do with the Gospel for today, the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus?

Well, let's see.

First, the beginning and the end. At the beginning: two disciples, trudging despondently away from Jerusalem. They are bereft, confused, defeated. They have their mysterious encounter with Jesus, and how does it end? The two are reunited with the eleven and their companions. The private meeting with Jesus instantly sends them back to the group: the sense is that individual spirituality, private discipleship, isn't really a Christian thing. If the journey with Jesus is going to continue, it's going to be together. That's the only way disciples will grow. Faith might start out there on your own; it grows in community. We saw the same thing hinted at, maybe, in the story of Thomas last week: whatever the block in Thomas' life was, whatever the faithlessness he needed to leave behind was, maybe it had something to do with him being temporarily out of the apostolic company.

Well, what is it about that company which makes discipleship happen? And here again, the Emmaus story is helpful. How do Cleopas and his companion move from dejection to discipleship? Answer, through having the scriptures opened to them. Through hearing, in a new way, stories and prophecies and laws they had always known, and coming to see how it was all about Jesus. If you want to be a Christian, says the Emmaus story, you need to read

the Bible – and not just as a private individual. That might be a spiritually worthwhile thing to do (and it might not be). But read it with Jesus as your guide, reading it as part of the people where he promised to be: that's how you grow. That's why reading Scripture together, as part of our prayer and worship, is perhaps the most basic thing a church does.

And if Scripture is the most basic, then perhaps this is the next: 'when he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.' And he was made known to them, says St. Luke, in the breaking of the bread. You'll know Jesus insofar as you're part of the people that reads the Bible with Him and sits at his table, which receives the bread which is his body, his life. This is where he is promised to be. You might be able to find him elsewhere; He goes where He wants. But this community, reading the Bible together, sharing the supper, this is where the promise points. If you're serious about being a Christian, then unless there's a very good reason, you've got to be here.

And lastly, of course, church is simply where we learn to love each other. Where there's all sorts of people who you wouldn't choose, who wouldn't necessarily be your first pick for friends, who maybe rub you up the wrong way – and who Jesus says you have to learn to love. It's in a community where all our talk about love and bearing each other's burdens and helping each other out takes flesh. Becomes real. No such thing as private discipleship, just shared lives.

And all this is why the Church used to be very clear, much clearer than it is now, that actually coming to church, week by week, regular as clockwork is the bread and butter of being Christian. Of course there's more to being a Christian than that; of course it is not just about coming to church – but this is the basis. If you are not regularly with other Christians, reading the Bible with them, and receiving communion, then it's a fat lot of use complaining about how weak and dim your spiritual life seems. Of course it does. You're not doing the basics. Not that everything will be wonderful and easy and spiritually rich when you *do* do the basics – but at least you'll be on the right path.

Now, right now, we are all excused. We *can't* come. Fair enough. And we do the best we can, online, on the phone, whatever – and all of that is great. But a church cannot do that forever. And this enforced absence should at least make us think about what it is that we're missing, and why it matters, and how when we *do* come back, we need to come back

determined to pay more attention to the very fundamentals of our life together. Why do you come to church? To be together; to read the Bible together; to break bread together. Friendship. Bible. Sacrament. How, when we come back, do we make our focus is unswervingly on these essentials? If we want to know the risen Jesus, if we want to be his witnesses in the world, that's where we need to start, and where we need to stay.