

Luke 24:13-24:35 **Emmaus Experience**

It's almost certain you've all heard a sermon based on what happened on the road to Emmaus.

It's a story worth repeating again and again because it's at the very heart of the Gospel. It highlights the living hope found only in the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. St Paul wrote to his friends at Corinth, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead" (1 Cor 15:19,20). But on that first Easter day that living hope was far from being established in the experience of the two people we read of in the New Testament lesson (Luke 24:13-35). Let's put ourselves in their shoes as they set out on the seven-mile walk from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It was a:

HEART-BREAKING EXPERIENCE

Disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, despair and death. All of these are summed up in the words of Cleopas and his companion to the stranger who joined them on the Emmaus road. They had left the dispirited and confused band of disciples with the events of Good Friday fresh in their memories. We can sympathize with their bewilderment. The band of Jesus' followers was leaderless and was falling apart, with two of them already on their way home. The reports that Christ's tomb was empty did nothing to alter their thinking; it only confused them. Their entire world had come apart. The two despondent disciples summed up the situation very neatly, "we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel."

Human hope is a fragile thing, and when it withers it's difficult to revive. Hopelessness as a disease of the human spirit is desperately hard to cure. When you see someone you love and care for overtaken by illness, which goes on, and on, despair sets in. It almost becomes impossible to hope for

recovery, to be even afraid to hope because of not being able to cope with another letdown.

The Emmaus Two had erected a wall of hopelessness around them, and they were trapped in their misery. "We had hoped ..." What they were saying is "We don't expect it now, but once we did. We had it, this thing called hope, but now it's gone." Can you identify with that? Has something or someone come between your relationship with God? If so, listen to the Emmaus story because the heart-breaking experience is only its beginning!

As the travellers made their weary way to Emmaus a stranger fell alongside them. It was going to be one of the most wonderful walks in history! We know, of course, that it was the risen Jesus, but somehow they didn't recognize him. In fact Luke tells us "they were kept from recognizing him." It wasn't an accident that they didn't notice who he is or that they were too preoccupied to look at him in the eye. No, they weren't allowed to recognize Jesus for a purpose. It was so that they might be in the same position as ourselves some 2,000 years later.

The stranger asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" And so they poured out their sad story to someone who seemed so willing to listen. How wonderfully kind and compassionate is our Lord. He could well have ticked them off, to say the least, for their lack of faith in him. Hadn't he told them that "unless a seed dies, it abides alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit"? (John 12:24). But no, Jesus doesn't berate them, but rather, as someone put it in moving words, "In his infinite courtesy, Jesus remembered the frailty of over-strained nerves and bewildered minds and came, not too suddenly or overwhelming upon them, but in a way which He alone could do, revealed Himself as the Risen Christ."

The way that Jesus dealt with the situation is a lesson to all that are in a position to help those who have lost hope. They need companionship. They need a listening ear before a stream of good advice. The last thing they need is a brisk "cheering up" talk or being told to "snap out of it". Instead, let's be there with them. Let's love them by listening, by accepting what it is that they feel. There'll be time later to point them to the way of hope, to the One in whom all hope is to be found, but first things first. It's then in our story that the heart-breaking experience changes to a:

HEART-SEARCHING EXPERIENCE

Their spokesman, Cleopas, expressed surprise at even being asked what was worrying them, "Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn't know the things that have happened there in these days?" There seems to be a note of incredulity in the voice of Cleopas, but Jesus continues patiently and innocently asks, "What things?" "About Jesus of Nazareth," they eagerly replied.

The two Emmaus bound disciples were correct in their theology as far as it went. They told the stranger that this Jesus "was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people" (20). "He was ..." - notice the use of the past tense, which strongly implies that he wasn't relevant to the present or otherwise they wouldn't have been in their present downcast state of mind. Their experience of Jesus was in the past, and they thought they were alone. The Cross had taken him from them, and their minds hadn't made sense of the changed situation, or adjusted to it. The Cross was just a great negative to them.

We've all heard exciting testimonies of what Jesus has done in the past - but what about the present? The past is history. The question must be: is Jesus "a present, bright reality" to those who give their experience, to you and me? Do we always

recognize him beside us? Life has many distractions - hard work, routine, tiredness, ill health - which can so grind us down that we carry on mechanically, never lifting our eyes - or minds - from the dust of the earthly road we travel. We become unaware of the glory and strength of his presence with us. Life loses its meaning and leaves us washed out, but this story gives us hope.

Jesus is still there. He's the unseen "stranger", walking with us, listening to us and, if we are willing to hear his voice, revealing himself to us. As the two disciples spoke of the Cross he took hold of their bewilderment and sorrow and gave them a heart-ing experience. How did he do it? He pointed them to God's self-revelation in the Scriptures. Luke tells us, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Jesus must have given the Emmaus travellers the greatest Old Testament exposition in history - to a congregation of two! It was then that the jigsaw of the types, shadows and symbols of the Old Testament revelation began to come together. He would have reminded them that right back at the Fall of Mankind the apparently victorious Satan, in the form of the serpent, was told that the seed, the offspring of the woman "will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15). What a wonderful anticipation of Jesus at Calvary.

And so was foretold the story of the cosmic struggle between death and life, of the pattern of death and resurrection in the Old Testament revelation. It's clearly visible in the life of Abraham, sacrificing his dear and only son Isaac and getting him back again; of Joseph, preserved to become the benefactor of his brothers who tried to destroy him; of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt after having been saved from the angel of death through the sign of the blood of the

Passover lamb.

Jesus would have recalled his own teaching of how the Israelites escaped physical death in the wilderness from a plague of serpents when they looked trustingly to a great bronze serpent which Moses raised on a pole, pointing out that he too would be lifted up on the Cross, "that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life in him" (John 3:15). Jesus would surely have taken the now speechless disciples through the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah. He would have recounted how the nation of Israel, taken into exile and brought back again to rebuild Jerusalem, was a symbol of the greater redemption through personal salvation through faith in him. Here was proof that Jesus had fulfilled that which had been prophesied over the centuries; that these Old Testament anticipations of his passion and triumph of life over death, proved that he was indeed the Messiah. The two disciples couldn't have expected that sharing their problem with the stranger on the Emmaus road brought them towards a solution. But there was more to it than that. Christ wasn't there besides them simply to help them to find solutions - he was in the problem itself. Jesus told his two listeners, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things ..."

The problem for the disciples was how to make sense of the Cross, how to accept it. Jesus helped them to do that, showing them that the Cross itself was the creative act of God. The apostle Paul would later write, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting men's sins against them" (2 Cor 5:19). The Cross of shame and suffering had become the Cross of Redemption for all who would come to Jesus in repentance and faith.

When Jesus intrudes into our lives, probing our thoughts, it is for the purpose of blessing us. But how do we respond? Do

we, like the disciples from Emmaus, welcome his initiative and let him minister to us? Do we want him to keep talking and explaining what previously baffled us? Sometimes the things he reveals are uncomfortable as he encroaches into our conscience, and invades the private areas of our lives.

Cleopas and his companion accepted the gentle rebuke that Jesus made, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." Perhaps the key word is "all". It wasn't that they hadn't read the prophets of old, but perhaps they'd read the Scriptures selectively, concentrating on those parts that spoke of a triumphant Messiah who would be kind to his enemies and be victorious. The passages that spoke of a suffering servant didn't fit in with their expectation of the Messiah and they'd tended to skip over them. When they had been given the exposition from the Scriptures they reacted positively, and in fact they wanted even more, which led them to:

THE HEART-BURNING EXPERIENCE

Their two-hour journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus must have seemed like five minutes, being so wrapped up in this absorbing conversation with the Lord they hadn't yet recognized. Luke informs us that, "As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he was going further." Jesus is a gentleman; he won't force himself if he's not really wanted. He awaited their invitation to come in.

God gave to the world the greatest and the most perilous gift in the world, the gift of free will; and we can use it to invite Christ into our hearts or allow him to pass on. In the vision of the Book of the Revelation we find his words, "... Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (3:19,20).

There's a famous picture painted of this scene, of Jesus knocking at a door, but there's no handle to it. I expect there is a handle, but it's on the inside! This is very much the situation in the Emmaus story. We're told that "Jesus acted as if he was going further." It was a test to see if the disciples had more appetite for the things of God. They did. We're told, "They urged Jesus strongly, 'Stay with us ...'" That's the sort of invitation that Jesus can't resist! "He went in to stay with them."

They needn't have asked him in; he was ready to move on. But no, their hearts had been won over. A basic meal was quickly got ready. The bread is on the table and the moment for Jesus' disclosure has come. How does he do it? "He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them." It was the action of the breaking of bread. They saw his hands - they were different from when he had broken bread at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and at the Last Supper. They were the nail-pierced hands of Jesus. In an instant they knew him. And in an instant, he's gone.

Why did Jesus have to disappear? Couldn't he have stayed longer? He could, but he didn't because it's all part of the education of his last 40 days on Earth - how to manage without his bodily presence from now on; exactly the same as we have to do some 2,000 years on. But he is with us still by his Spirit; he is with us as we join in fellowship with him in worship and, in obedience to his command, as we remember him in the "breaking of bread" service.

I can imagine Cleopas and his friend standing in amazement; perhaps embracing in great joy, asking each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Their world had come together again. That heart-burning experience is something

that we all need. We need it in a conversion experience when the Spirit of God makes us realize that we need Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. We need it as we allow the Holy Spirit to apply the truths of Scripture in our daily walk with Jesus.

Well, where are we in our experience? Are we still heart-breaking because we need to meet the risen Christ? Perhaps we're still in a heart-searching process - if so, let it continue as it will surely lead to the heart-burning experience we all need. God deeply longs for each one of us to walk with Him in close fellowship so He can fulfil His plans for our lives. The Emmaus Two no doubt had walked this way many times before. Yet this day would be different, for it was the time for a life-changing encounter with their Lord. He can draw near to us at any time. The ways of God aren't always obvious so we must be open to allow him to enlighten our understanding, to take us into a new level in our spiritual experience. Life will never be the same again!

The two disciples lost no time in retracing their steps to Jerusalem to share the Good News. Christ is risen from the dead! Christ is the Saviour! Christ is the hope of the world! May that be our experience this Easter time and for the rest of our life. In His name we pray, AMEN.