

Easter 3 – the Road to Emmaus

The Gospel reading that we had today is one of those readings that I simply can never hear enough. Like Shrek the Ogre from the famous movie, this reading resembles an onion – no, it isn't smelly and it doesn't turn brown and sprout hairs in the sun. It is just that it has so many layers! But as with so much of the Bible, to read it out of context can limit our vision of the wider truth and restrict our understanding of the events it is trying to describe. As with all scripture, we must always keep the overall narrative in sight otherwise our vision can become skewed and somewhat distorted.

When trying to get to the truth of any situation, it can be extremely helpful to examine a number of different witness accounts. So important is this, that our entire legal system relies heavily on this kind of investigation. Assuming the witnesses are being honest about what they genuinely believe to have witnessed, then bringing together different testimonies of the same event can help to paint a more rounded picture; each testimony adds different levels of detail and fills in a few of the gaps in the story along the way.

This is what is remarkable about the resurrection narratives in the New Testament. Each one is slightly different, and many of them are unique, placing Jesus in different places, at different times and appearing to different people. Some have claimed that this variation in the accounts of Jesus' resurrection suggests a certain lack of validity in the claims they make about Jesus rising from the dead. But actually if we read the different narratives side by side, we get a real sense of the writers grappling with how to tell of events that were remarkable and outside of their usual experience of normal life. Each story adds detail to what the resurrection experiences might actually have been like, and just as important, what it might have felt like to experience them. And, given the circumstances, the lines of similarity running through all the narratives are equally remarkable.

Now there has been far too much ink, for my liking, spent on arguments about whether the physical resurrection of Jesus actually happened. The reality is, that outside of the Gospel testimony and individual religious experience, we simply can never prove it one way or another. You either believe the testimony or you don't – in the end it comes down to a simple matter of faith. What is clear, however, is that those who passed on the testimonies of these experiences certainly felt that they had met Jesus in his resurrected form – and there were many who testified to this, not just one or two. Sadly, we don't have nearly enough time to do justice to a full

exposition of the resurrection narratives. So this morning I would like us to think a little about how Jesus' resurrection might touch our lives. And to do this, we must first consider how the Apostles may have experienced him in his resurrected form.

In the New Testament Jesus seems to be present with his disciples both physically and mystically.

At the tomb, in the upper room, on the mountain, on the road to Emmaus and on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius, Jesus is clearly physically present in some way. But isn't it curious how often the disciples, his best friends who have been with him through thick and thin, still fail to recognise him at first glance?

We had one such example in the Gospel reading set for today. Both Mark's and Luke's Gospels tell of Jesus appearing to two disciples on the Road; Luke locates this meeting as having happened on the road to Emmaus. Interestingly, both Mark's and Luke's narratives suggest that Jesus was initially unrecognisable to these disciples. Mark states that he appeared to them in 'another form', whilst Luke states that they did not recognise him until after he had revealed to them who he is in reference to the scriptures and had broken bread at table with them later on. Luke's is a clear reference back to the Last Supper and how his disciples would recognise him in future through the physical elements of the Eucharist. Most interesting however is how, once they realise who he is, Jesus then vanishes. It is as if he's saying, 'at last they've got it, job done! I can now go.'

Then Luke's Gospel says that the two disciples who had seen Jesus on the road, went and told the others what they had seen. The others reply by saying that Jesus has also appeared to Peter. While they are comparing notes, however, Jesus comes and stands among them. But they are terrified and they think they are seeing a ghost! – well who wouldn't? But isn't this a little strange? Here they are now expecting Jesus, knowing that he is risen and yet they mistake him for a ghost!

And there are other occasions when his disciples initially fail to recognise Jesus after his resurrection too. In John's Gospel narrative, when Mary Magdalene meets the resurrected Jesus at the tomb, she first mistakes him for the gardener. The Gardener! Honestly, she's supposed to be one of his closest friends! Only when he speaks her name, does she recognise who he really is.

John then has Jesus appearing again to the disciples by the sea of Tiberius. He appears on the shore whilst the others are fishing, but again

they fail to recognise who he really is – implying he is present in something beyond a purely physical sense. Only when he points them in the direction of where they should lower their nets to catch fish – as he did when he first met them – do they recognise who he is. Jesus then says to them ‘come and have breakfast! And he broke bread and gave it to them’.

All of these narratives seem to point to Jesus being present in some kind of mystical as well as physical form; that Jesus’ appearance is not entirely ‘bodily’ in the normal sense, but that he is changed in some mysterious way.

Outside of the Gospels, there are two other places in the New Testament where we are told of Jesus’ resurrection appearances: The Book of Acts and Paul’s First Letter to the Church in Corinth. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that Jesus appeared to the Apostles for forty days and then he ascended to heaven, followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when the missionary task of the Church was to begin.

It is Paul’s experience, however, that is most intriguing for us and I think it can go a long way in helping us understand how we can personally engage with Jesus’ resurrection today. Paul was, of course, originally named Saul and changed his name as a result of his conversion. Saul meets the risen Christ on the road to Damascus during an astonishing religious experience. Previously he was the great persecutor, doing terrible things to Christians in order to try and destroy the Church. In his first letter to the Corinthians, we have the earliest resurrection testimony to have been written down, and what is more it is written first-hand by Paul himself. It doesn’t seem that Paul (then Saul) meets Jesus in normal physical bodily form. Acts tells us that Saul sees a bright light and hears a voice from heaven saying ‘Saul, why do you persecute me?’. Nonetheless, Paul is convinced that he meets the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. In 1 Corinthians 9, he states; ‘have I not seen Jesus our Lord?’ Then in chapter 15 he says: ‘Last of all, as to one untimely born, Jesus appeared to me.’ (1 Cor. 15.8).

It seems that his experience of meeting the Risen Christ, was for Paul, inseparably linked to his realization that those he was persecuting were the living embodiment of Jesus who himself had been persecuted. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul refers to this experiential appearance as his "seeing" the Christ; and then in 1 Corinthians 15, it becomes clear that the appearance of the Risen Christ was, for Paul, deeply connected to the personal realization that Jesus was now alive in the members of his mystical body, the Church.

So, in the New testament, we seem to have Jesus ‘appearing’ to his followers in different ways. In all of these reflections on Jesus’ resurrection, we must understand a few things. First, we must realise the intensity of the emotions that it must have conjured in those experiencing

these events first-hand. This will not have been easy to witness. It will have raised far more questions than answers. And once they accepted the truth and reality of the situation, it will have left an unavoidable imperative to proclaim the Gospel truth, wherever that may lead. All these are no less true for us today. We will be filled with strange and sometime uncomfortable emotions as the resurrected Christ enters into our reality. And once we recognise this, we are left with no alternative than to follow wherever he may lead.

Then we must recognise that for each disciple the 'reality' of what they were witnessing will have dawned at different times and in different ways. Some may have fought it for a very long time. For Thomas, it took the physical touching of Jesus' body to make him believe what his stubbornness would otherwise not allow him to. For others, it was clearly enough to piece together all that they had experienced and then recognise Jesus' presence with them in a more mystical sense. We may find that we have one or other of these reactions or maybe something somewhere in-between.

Lastly, and this is most important, Jesus' presence is no less real for us today. He is as active in the body of believers now as he was then. If we look we will continue to recognise his presence working amongst us in our Churches and our communities; bringing us closer to God through our worship, making himself known in the 'breaking of bread' at the Eucharist and meeting us in the faces of others. For some of us, like Paul, we might even meet him in a remarkable religious experience that is personal to us alone.

Personal crises – bereavement, a serious illness, threat to our livelihoods, relationship breakdowns – can all challenge our faith and our understanding and awareness of God. For us, such challenges can sometimes enrich our faith, and conversely it can sometimes make us feel at a distance from God. This kind of challenge was exactly what many of the apostles will have experienced and certainly what Paul was experiencing on the road to Damascus.

During this time of lockdown, as we struggle with all the strange emotions and restrictions the current situation places upon our lives, we are presented with the perfect time to reflect on our own sense of awareness of the presence of God and how the resurrected Christ may be truly present in our lives.

Amen