

Year A Easter 3

Acts 2:14a, & 36-41

1 Peter 1:17-23

Luke 24: 13-35

Compassion, companion...

This story, of Cleopas and his companion, walking seven miles back to their home on that first Easter Day is probably my second favourite gospel reading. I, along with many others have understood Cleopas' travelling companion to be his wife, but interestingly, I have heard a preacher say it was another disciple. Of course, those two statements may not be mutually incompatible, given the male-centric society that did not count women as they did men.

Cleopas and his wife were downcast. They were bewildered. They were utterly shaken in their confidence that Jesus was the Messiah. All their expectations of Jesus – the Messiah who would change the world in an instant – had ended in Jesus' abject death of the cruellest kind. All their hopes had been dashed. They were no doubt traumatised by all that had happened, and their thought processes must have been all over the place, to put it mildly.

This is so human. It rings true to me, and I am sure to some of you. You have an unconscious plan in your head of how the next year, five years, ten years, all of your allotted three score and ten and hopefully more, shall play out. You only realise that you had such a strong vision of your future, a strong expectation of everything going along wonderfully well, when wham! Something happens to derail that vision, the perfectly acceptable notion of how your life will pan out. And it completely throws you off balance, you find yourself grieving for a future you are not going to have. You try and work out what happened. If you are lucky you may have a close friend or a partner you talk and talk about it, trying to make sense of it.

No wonder Cleopas and his wife were discussing the events of the last few days together; trying to get over the shock, trying to recall and piece together all that had happened – from their own recollections and from the fevered gossip in the alleyways and shops of Jerusalem. And they were grieving the loss of their teacher, mentor, and leader.

This road to Emmaus is a road many of us have walked. A road that the broken, the disillusioned, the scared and lonely, the grieving husband, wife or parent, and many others battered and suffering, walk.

Cleopas and his companion hadn't noticed the other person walking this same road to Emmaus. The other person made himself known by asking them a question, and so their dialogue began. And as a result of that initiative by the stranger, Cleopas and his wife invited the stranger to join them for a simple meal in their house. A simple invitation.

That invitation is pivotal. Jesus accepts the invitation of the host, Cleopas and enters his house. A simple meal was prepared, and it is at that very moment that 'he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them' that their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

As I read this stunningly simple and beautiful story once more in preparation for this sermon, my thoughts turned to Neville. In these last six months or so, Neville's diagnosis and treatment, and the death of the love of his life, Tilly, in March, will have been one of those life-changing and stressful times for him. Luckily for Neville, he has his faith, and has had a good number of people, close neighbours, friends, members of our congregations, and family, who have responded to support him. Although Neville has not exhibited any signs of losing hope or being totally without an anchor, I am sure he has had his 'dark nights of the soul', waiting for appointments, diagnoses, and receiving chemotherapy treatment, coping with its nasty aftereffects, grieving for the loss of Tilly, and contemplating what the future may hold for him.

This Emmaus Road story is a perfect example of what Christ asks us to do. To walk alongside people in their own times of 'passion', being compassionate, and being a companion alongside them on their journey. The very word companion comes from, '*com*' meaning together with, and '*panion*' meaning bread, both coming to us from its Latin roots via the French language into English. So, a companion is someone who literally or figuratively 'breaks bread together' with the other person. It denotes and recalls Christ's Last Supper and the simple meal with Cleopas and his wife; a time of deep connection, more than physical nourishment, a spiritual nourishment.

I know Neville has done his fair share of such companionship, of fellowship alongside others. Since his ordination in 1977, Neville has supported both congregations faithfully, and with intellectual rigour that one would expect

from a scientist, and with an ability to relate to all ages. Yesterday Neville took another journey, not a seven mile walk to Emmaus but a four-hour drive to Macclesfield, to live with his daughter and her family, to be cared for there.

Neville, I know, has been thankful for the cards, for the phone calls, for the visits over these last five weeks or so.

It can be hard to go and visit someone, always wondering what one can say, and whether in saying something we may say the wrong thing. Sometimes our own vulnerability is a barrier. However, I think that with careful forethought, and with a prayer, we can approach such visits with confidence. And sometimes, lots of words are not necessary, a companionable silence can be just as meaningful. And I believe that is what Christ calls us to do. To model his example, and to feel able to journey alongside someone, even for a short while, on their journey through life.

We are all walking our version of the Emmaus Road. Even if we don't always see or recognise the risen Christ, he is journeying with us. Jesus does not force himself on us. Jesus waits for the invitation each and every day.

So, let us give thanks for all that Neville has contributed to the life of both congregations, St Mungo's and St James the Less, and resolve to see where we can continue to be companions to others on their journey through life, and be present with them not just at their times of joy but also at their times of trial and suffering; and that we may bring some comfort and relief, and bring Christ's light into the lives of others.

And as we prepare to share the bread, broken and blessed, may we know Christ's presence in and around us, today and always.