

Seeing the Whole Picture

If the story of the Prodigal Son has a claim to be the finest story Jesus ever told, a story you will find in our fabulous stained window, the tale of the two on the road to Emmaus must have an equal claim to be the finest scene that Luke ever sketched. At the level of drama it has everything. Sorrow, suspense, puzzlement, gradual dawning of light, unexpected actions, astonished recognition, a flurry of excitement and activity. And it has all this because the two followers of Jesus, walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus during the afternoon of that first Easter Day could not see the whole picture. They could only see a part. And because they could only see a part, they couldn't understand the events of the previous few days and why what happened to Jesus happened.

[Occasionally, we also struggle to see the whole picture because we're presented with only a part. I wonder if you're able to make out what these pictures show. Eight ordinary objects ...]

In our story of the followers of Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Luke only tells us the name of one of them – Cleopas. It's likely that his walking companion was his wife Mary given that they seem to live together in the

house they eventually arrive at in Emmaus, but maybe Luke leaves the other person nameless in order that they could be any one of us. It's an interesting thought and a good way of us reading the story.

So, let's imagine that you're walking home late that day and the death of Jesus still doesn't make sense. Together with Cleopas, you might be thinking "We knew Jesus was the one! Nobody ever did or said things like he did. And that makes it all the more appalling, what's happened. We had pinned all our hopes on him. This, surely, was the man God would use to rescue Israel!"

We talk on and on about what we saw Jesus do, about his teaching, about God's coming Kingdom that we'd already begun to glimpse in him. It just doesn't make sense. Has God been playing a cruel trick on us, or what?

And now there's someone else on the road; a stranger's come to join us. He quickly sees we're not exactly looking bright and breezy, so we explain it all again, this time to him. Our hopes. Our beliefs. Our crushing disappointment. Our sense of utter despair... "And then," we tell him, "just to make matters worse, some of the women came rushing in to say the tomb was empty. What's it all about? Has someone stolen his body?"

"But," says the stranger, "haven't you read your Bibles?"

(That's a bit much, frankly. We know the scriptures; have done so since we were children. What's this about?)

"Well," continues the stranger, "hasn't it occurred to you that all through the Bible God allows his people to get into a real mess – slavery, defeat, despair, and finally exile in Babylon – in order to do a new thing? Isn't that what the prophets and the Psalms were about as well? Passage after passage in which Israel is promised that God will rescue them from slavery, even from sin, and sometimes even from death – but first they have to go through it and out the other side? Well then, supposing that's what had to happen to the Messiah himself, Israel's personal representative?"

You just begin to see, looming up through the mist of your sorrow and puzzlement, a new picture, a new pattern, a new possibility. It makes you feel warm deep down inside, like a hot drink on a freezing cold day. Then – we're home! But what's our new friend going to do? We'd better invite him in.

He comes in quietly and you prepare a simple meal. Good to have a guest, especially one who can explain the scriptures like that. Supposing ...

But then he stops being a guest and starts acting like he's the host. Picks up the bread and suddenly everything goes

into slow motion, like it does if you fall off your donkey on the road. Where have I seen someone do that before ... those eyes, that gentle, firm smile, that motion with the hands ... he's breaking the bread ... and then, all in a rush

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"It's you! It's him! How come we didn't recognise ...?"

And then he's gone. Vanished. Didn't get up and leave. Just seemed to disappear. It's as though he could come and go between heaven and earth. We can still hardly believe what's happened, but we do know what to do. Get back to Jerusalem! But now, instead of being gloomy, we hurry along excitedly, with that warm feeling in our hearts as we remember how he explained the Bible to us.

When we get back, we find they've heard it too! Simon Peter's seen him as well. So it isn't just us going off our heads. It's real. He's real. He's alive! He really *was* the Messiah. And he really *has* rescued Israel. Not sure how yet, or what it's all going to mean. But this is new. We are *new*.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus is a wonderful, unique, spellbinding tale, but it's also a *model*, I think, for what being a Christian is all about. It's a model for those of us who have been Christians our whole lives,

or for someone [like little Margaux,] starting that journey of faith today, [helped by her mum and her godparents.]

For we've all experienced the failure of human hopes – something we really expected or hoped would happen but didn't. Whether that's a relationship, financial security, academic success, a healing, or something else. We might well have turned to someone for help but that help didn't come. As Christians, I hope that there have been times where you've discovered in scripture an unexpected verse or story that has helped you to find truth, something that has enabled you to experience Jesus for yourself – to imagine him present with you, warming your heart, showing himself as bread is broken.

The two on the road to Emmaus that day must have wondered who that stranger was. Cleopas might have thought at first that the mystery traveller could have been a spy; it must have taken a certain amount of courage to reveal that the two of them were followers of Jesus. But the story they then tell is simple, profound and poignant. They had regarded Jesus as a prophet, and more than a prophet. He was the one who would redeem Israel – rescue them from the oppressive rule of the Roman occupation.

And that's why the crucifixion was so devastating. It wasn't just that Jesus had been the bearer of their hopes and he was now dead and gone. It was sharper than that: if Jesus had been the one to redeem Israel, he should have been *defeating* the pagans, not dying at their hands! Cleopas' puzzled statement only needs the slightest twist to turn it into a joyful statement of early Christian faith: 'They crucified him – but we hoped he would redeem Israel' would shortly become, 'They crucified him – and that was how he *did* redeem Israel!' And it was, of course, the resurrection that made the difference.

But, before these two followers could begin to understand what had just happened, they had to be prepared. They, like everybody else in Israel, had been reading the Bible through the wrong end of the telescope. They had been seeing it as the long story of how God would redeem Israel from suffering, but it was instead the story of how God would redeem Israel through suffering, through the suffering that would be taken on by Jesus himself, Israel's Messiah.

We don't know why Cleopas and his companion couldn't recognise Jesus as he joined them on the road. Perhaps it goes hand in hand with the fact that they couldn't

recognise the events that had just happened as being part of the story of God's redemption.

And, for that, we too need to learn how to read the Scriptures; and for that we need, as our teacher, the risen Lord himself, experienced through the Holy Spirit.

This passage forms one of the most powerful encouragements to pray for his presence, and sense of guidance, whenever we study the Bible, individually or as part of a small group, and whether we've followed Jesus all of our lives or are at the very beginning of our faith journey. We need to be prepared for him to rebuke our foolish and faithless readings, and to listen for his fresh interpretation. Only with him at our side, will our hearts burn within us and lead us to the point where we see him face to face.

Amen.