

**St Mary's Parish Church, Haddington
Sunday 30th April, 2017 at 11am
The Third Sunday of Easter**

The following readings were heard:

Acts 2: 14a, 36-41

Luke 24: 13-35

Sermon

Stepping out and up

I love the story of the road to Emmaus. It perfectly captures the ambivalence of the situation after the death of Jesus. Here were two of his followers, Cleopas and another unnamed person, heading AWAY from Jerusalem, where the rest of the disciples and other supporters still remained, and towards the village of Emmaus, seven miles away as we heard.

Despite the fact that the women who went to the tomb earlier in the day had seen a vision of angels who had told them that Jesus had risen in fulfillment of Scriptural prophecy, they were heading back, presumably to their regular lives, whatever that was.

They were shocked and grieving – “we had thought he was the one to redeem Israel” – and trying to make sense of it all, peeling off from what seems to have been a larger group of supporters than just the eleven, who remained in Jerusalem.

I bet that these two were just the tip of the iceberg. We don't have to look far in our own experience to see examples of movements that are running at a peak of popularity, then something happens, a leader steps down or in politics isn't elected again, and the momentum goes out of it. It's a curious alchemy there, and

probably a great weakness in our human condition. We're easily spooked and loyalty can be a fragile and precious commodity. Fear is often the stronger emotion, and we look for strong leaders to get behind. Some are perhaps more hard-wired to it than others, and can transcend the barriers of fear and the hurdle of effort and perceived "success" to get stuck in when the times get tough.

There's an element of dark humour in this story too. Jesus walking alongside them – still unrecognised at this point – hears them honestly grieving and perplexed (who could blame them!) You can imagine Jesus saying to himself "Did they not hear what I'd been saying all along about what the Scriptures said about me – and then I sent the angels to the tomb, just to make the point again, and still they can't get it? Boy, how thick can they be??

So you can imagine that maybe he was a bit assertive with them when he had to say it all again, and a bit incredulous when they still don't recognise him.

But let's cut them some slack. They'd been through a lot, and this was completely new territory – resurrection wasn't something that they had any experience of! There was nothing in their Jewish tradition to relate to.

But Jesus' talk hadn't missed the mark completely – there's that "what if" moment here when Jesus makes to walk off. It's a kind of "whatever" moment for Jesus. He's saying, "well, I've done what I can, take it or leave it." And they HAVE been affected by him – they say afterwards that their hearts "burned within them" – that phrase famously re-used by John Wesley when he said that

his “heart was strangely warmed” in his encounter with God.

So there’s something about this man, and they urge him to stay – they want to hear more, perhaps they feel they ought not to just let him wander off alone into the night.

So Jesus gets another chance, and once again he basically does what he’s done already. “Ok, let’s have a go with something simpler perhaps – let’s see if they get it if I show them the sign of the Passover supper. Surely they’ll get this!”

And he takes the bread and breaks it – and that’s enough. They get it now – it’s the last supper again. They might even have not yet connected the breaking of bread in the meal to the breaking of his body on the cross, but now after it’s all happened they see it better. It’s a

thumping moment of realisation that cuts right through them.

It's like a dam bursting or something, all the pent up feelings and frustration and sadness come bursting out and they see it all so clearly. And despite the fact that it's night they rush out and head back to Jerusalem to the others and tell THEM what they've experienced. In a brief sentence what was likely a big rammy of folk shouting and debating is summed up. And then as the Gospel continues beyond what we heard today, in a parallel to the reading from John last week, Jesus appears again to them all.

It's all so immediate and direct, isn't it? The honest feelings, the sadness, the excitement, the sense that they are right at the beginning of something incredible, that then leads on to what we heard in Peter's speech in the book of the Acts of

the Apostles, cajoling, urging inspiring folk to follow, and carrying out the instruction of Jesus to baptise and make disciples in his name.

We see all this through many layers of course – and that can take the edge off the intensity and immediacy of the experience.

But we have this sign – the breaking of bread, the simple loaf, made up of the fruits of the earth and the work of our hands, that Jesus used to show what would happen to him. That breaking of the bread is today's sign that Jesus still gives us – a sign that holds so much and yet is so simple. When we break it in communion we are brought right back into the heart of this story, where we welcome Jesus into the action of a simple meal.

God is alongside us right now. We need to trust that whatever happens in our lives and as a community of faith here, there will be moments where breaking bread alongside a stranger IS that meeting with Jesus. And we may not know that it has even happened, but what a way to live, expecting that this might happen.

The road to Emmaus story is about living in the place where God and the world meet, a “wonderful exchange” (as John Calvin said, using Augustine’s image) between God and humanity and we don’t necessarily know exactly how, but we are not alone, and it is our job to be open to that, and to help others to be open to it too.

There will be times when we feel more inclined to walk in the opposite direction, but let’s be Emmaus road people, with all the foibles and glory of our human

nature, and keep walking alongside Christ in the stranger and gather round the tables of the supper here and in our homes to meet Christ there. **AMEN**