

Easter 3 year A 2020

In TS Eliot's play *The Cocktail Party* an 'unidentified guest' says to Edward, the host of the party 'let me tell you, that to approach the stranger/Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force/ Or let the genie out of the bottle./ It is to start a train of events/ Beyond your control.'

Cleopas and his companion, of course, did not have the wisdom of foresight, nor any knowledge of the writings of TSEliot – if they had, would they have invited this stranger into their house to share a meal with them? Would we invite in a stranger, invite him/her to join us at our table, and eat with us? That would make us vulnerable – if only to the embarrassment of eating with someone whose table manners aren't quite what we expect. I can't stand it when . . . (well, I won't tell you in case it is a crime you have committed!) But Cleopas and his friend (or is it his wife?) do invite this stranger in, and a new force is released, the totally unexpected happens.

Luke develops his story slowly. It is, in our time, Easter day in the afternoon. Passover is over, the two travellers can make their way home from Jerusalem and they can rehearse to one another what they will do now, when they are at their wits end, when what they had once thought was worth everything is gone from them, destroyed by the Romans and the Temple authorities, when they are emotionally washed up. It is a seven mile journey. Plenty of time to go over the same ground, time and again. So when a stranger, walking in the same direction, asks what they are talking about, they can hardly believe it. What else could anyone be talking about except the death of Jesus of Nazareth? Isn't the pain they are feeling the only thing in the world that matters? They meet this stranger on the road, but they totally fail to recognise him. 'We had hoped . . .' they say. But that hope has gone. Even the story of angels which the women bring cannot restore that hope; it was, they thought, just an idle tale.

Gently, Jesus takes them on a tour of their own scriptures, beginning with Moses (i.e. the first five books of what we call the Old Testament), and then the writings of the prophets. It sounds more like teaching from Matthew's Gospel than from the superb story teller Luke. So, having met Jesus on the road, but having failed to recognise him, they now meet him in the Scriptures – and although they still don't recognise him, they begin to know him. 'Did

not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?' Luke has led us to the point where we can begin to understand that the suffering and death of Jesus are not the defeat of God's purpose in the incarnation, but are a necessary pathway to new life, to a new creation. The pattern of life emerging from death is, in fact, part of the same pattern seen throughout the biblical sag. From chaos (Genesis) God creates order and life; from slavery in Egypt comes freedom and a nation with a homeland; from the destruction of exile in Babylon comes a renewed people; from the death of Jesus comes resurrection. Their hearts burn within them.

And then the meal! There are many meals in Luke's gospel – meals which evoke the longed-for gathering of Israel (see Isa 25.6-9), meals which demonstrate the inclusive spirit of Jesus' mission (see Luke 14, 15, 19) – and now the full revelation of who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection mean comes at a meal, with the blessing and breaking of bread. Jesus gives himself to the travellers and they finally know him; they not only know him, they need to share him. Although it is dark, they rush back to Jerusalem to spread the good news – the Gospel. Christ is Risen! We have seen the Lord! And they rejoin the community of the followers of Jesus.

Isn't this the story of our own experience? We recognise Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and we want to do that with other people, which is why lockdown is so frustrating – we may not do this together and we cannot do it alone. But when we do gather together, when we do encounter Jesus in the breaking of bread, do we rush off to tell others 'I have seen the Lord', or is it just a private affair - 'I go to church to make MY communion'?

The disciples had a partial encounter with Jesus in the scriptures – do you meet him there? Perhaps you would say 'yes' to the Gospel stories, but Moses and the prophets? Do these Old Testament books make your heart burn within you? It is salutary to reflect that Jesus himself said that all the scriptures referred in some way to himself – here in these texts he was to be found. And if we have difficulty finding him there, perhaps we need to read more, do a bit more work, and do it together.

Although Cleopas and his friend had a full revelation of Jesus in the breaking of bread and a partial glimpse of him in the scriptures, they failed altogether to recognise him in the stranger who walked beside them. Perhaps we too fail to recognise him in the stranger – we know him well enough in church – in Word and Sacrament – but do we see him in each other, in members of our own family, in tiresome relatives (the ones you feel guilty about for not visiting), in the sick, the lonely, the boring, in that person of a different faith, or none – in the stranger? In other words do you recognise him in those you meet in your daily lives – or used to meet before we closed our front doors for the duration? Fear not, they will be opened again – and you will meet . . . well, imagine meeting Christ in the one person you thought you could safely ignore! Talk about entertaining angels unaware! (Heb 13.2)