

The Road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35)

A Reflection – by Frank Brown

In this reflection we look once more to the story of the two on the road to Emmaus. It's a story we are very familiar with. But perhaps this will help you linger with it for a while and tease out some of the many layers of meaning it can have for us as both on a personal level and living out our faith on the road to Pentecost.

Luke 24:13: That same day, two of them were going to Emmaus, a village seven miles from Jerusalem and they talked about what had happened.

The story begins with Cleophas and his companion travelling from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It had been three days from the crucifixion of Jesus and they were grieving, confused and frightened. They had hoped that Jesus was their saviour, redeemer but all seemed in ruins. Their outward journey is a symbol of their inward search but they are travelling in the wrong direction. They are walking away from Jerusalem, the symbol of God's presence in the scriptures and in the midst of the paschal events they are going towards Emmaus. For them it seems Jerusalem is their place of pain. Jerusalem is a place of failure for them and they want to leave it, get away from it but in trying to move away from it they cannot leave it behind as they are still trying to make sense of it, discussing it with each other.

This is part of the human condition; life is a process of moving away from something and moving towards something. It is a process that involves a letting go, a process of dying and rising. In life we are faced with many contradictions and suffering that we cannot make sense of on our own.

God and God's love are, ultimately, its only theme. It is the understanding of God as love, the loving creator who creates us in God's image and holds that it is very good (*Genesis 1:31*), that is the foundation of the understanding of ourselves in all our failings and our understanding of God. First and foremost God created us out of love and it is from this love that humanity receives its dignity and purpose. Thus, Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, entered into creation over 2000 years ago and in that event of the incarnation God became human and entered in the most definitive way into the experience of humanity in creation. By becoming human (Phil 2:5-6) which is not only on the level of physical but on the level of human experience and decisions, in Jesus we see the clearest showing of a loving God who binds himself intimately with humanity, fills the earth with grace and who is personally involved with our world from creation onwards.

In this act of incarnation, Christ takes on the vocation of humanity, shares in the suffering and frustrations to communicate the love of God and the salvific nature of His love and grace for all creation.

Probably the most profound act of love is a theology of the Cross that incorporates the themes of self-donation, divine solidarity and the self-giving nature of God who, through the suffering of Jesus, relates to and transforms the suffering of humanity. As Volf puts it, "through the cross the triune God welcomes and suffers with victims, protects them and gives them rights of which they have been denied ... offering a sweet form of hospitality that has personal experience with humanity's pain". It is this type of love, as expressed in the cross, that is part of the self-giving nature of God then it should be fundamental any understanding of how I live my faith. This is not to spiritualise or 'religious-ise' people's suffering but to realise that, with a strong sense of justice, in no matter what situation we find ourselves we have a loving God always with us.

Luke 24:15-24: While they were talking and wondering, Jesus came up and walked with them, but their eyes were held and they did not recognise him.

He asked 'What is this you are talking about?' The two stood still, looking sad. Then the one name Cleophas answered, 'Why it seems you are the only traveller in Jerusalem who doesn't know what happened there these past few days' and they recounted their story.

Jesus joins them on the road and travels with them. He walks no faster or no slower than them. He meets them where they are at, not where He thinks they should be or where they ought to be and journeys with them even though this



journey is away from Jerusalem. They did not recognise Jesus because of the turmoil they were going through themselves, but Jesus does not judge them but asks them to recount their story. It is in the 'normal' of their lives that He meets them.

There is a powerful lesson here and a challenge for all in this. Jesus actively joins them, enters willingly into their reality – He does not wait for them to come to him. We have the privilege of working with and journeying with a number of different people, in various situations and in the moment of encounter is the moment opportunity for great learning – it is walking with people where they are and not where I think they should be or even would like them to be that provides the graced opportunity for dialogue. It is in their experience, listening to where they are in their story, their journey that true solidarity, compassion and love can take place. The challenge is not to 'do' Church but 'be' Church. The challenge is not to come with pre-scripted answers, demands and structures that we are comfortable with but to risk that true ministry lies in being open to and learning from God and the Spirit at work in the lives of those that we are privileged to be in service of.

It is in our experience, in listening and sharing the experience of others that we can see God at work and in our lives. So the experience of life is primary. Our experience, our dialogue with the world draws us in to the experience of the transcendent dimension of life as God is implicit in every experience of life. We co-experience / co-know God in the multiplicity of experience we have of human experience. Rahner Held that if Christianity is only about God in my experience then it is a God experience. So through our experience we are open to the immediacy of God to every human, the mediated immediacy of God in everyday life.

- David Tracey called it being present to "the God who is already there in our lives."
- Augustine said that God is more intimate to a person than the person to his/her self.
- Aquinas said that all knowing beings know God implicitly in every object of knowledge... God is implicit in our knowledge and experience of the world.
- Carl Jung said that whether called upon or not God will be present.
- TS Glist in "Little Gidding" puts it that "we shall not cease from exploration and the end of our exploration will be to arrive at where we started and know the place for the first time." Thus God was there at the point of departure and at the point of arrival.

So the question of God is not a question about the absence or presence of God, it is a question about the absence or presence of the individual to a God who is already there. The role of the Church and therefore the role of those in ministry is to enable us to experience God who is always present in our experience. Just as the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognise Jesus and Jesus walked with them in their experience, asked them to recount their experience, listened, journeyed with them – am I present or absent to the God who is already there? Or, in my own journey of faith, can I echo and learn from the model of Jesus and create opportunities in the ordinary that allow others to see and experience the God who is already there in their experience? Each opportunity, each meeting is a chance to encounter the living, risen Jesus. And a gentle gift for us that we can choose to take up, to deepen our relationship with Him.

Luke 24:25-27: "He said to them, 'How dull you are, how slow of understanding! You fail to believe the message of the prophets. Is it not written that the Christ should suffer all this and then enter his glory.' The starting with Moses and going through the prophets He explained everything in the scriptures concerning himself."

Jesus now speaks to them directly, not judgementally or apologetically. It is only when they are comfortable with Him that He offers them other ways of seeing, of understanding and experiencing. As Kathleen Doyle puts it "He put them in touch with the deepest part of themselves and tries to heal their memories. To talk about healing is to talk about hurts and when we give meaning to pain we are not destroyed or dehumanised by it. Jesus helps them put a blessing on their past." But what is so easily missed is that He does so in a language, in a narrative that connects with them. He does so in a way that acknowledges and respects their story but illuminates it in light of the living word.

Jesus delivers an amazing bible study, citing from memory passages from Moses and the Prophets, and explaining how each of them pertain to the Messiah. Jesus tied His death and resurrection to the tradition of prophetic teaching and explained plainly what generations of their scholars had misunderstood. Anderson maintains that theology occurs as

God joins us on our walk “stimulating our reflection and inspiring us to recognise the living word.” A word that is accessible and liberating, not removed from but intimately entwined in their own story.

All understanding of ministry, all understanding of our faith is rooted in, and in the service of, the mission of Jesus. To know the ministry and mission of Jesus we must know the scriptures, the Gospel and the tradition in the teaching that has grown over the years. As Jesus shares in this story the scriptures point to him, the Gospel is Christ centric and it is through it that we come to know Jesus and recognise his creative word in our own lives and experience. “Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition as the primary and perpetual foundation.”

We are constantly amazed at the thirst for scripture and the power it has to touch, help and heal. Whether it has been a Lectio Divina discussion with a group of adults, discussing the ‘calming of the storm’ with 4th and 5th class children, or Helping a bereaved family choose the readings for the funeral mass of their loved one the scripture is a living word that transforms, comforts and challenges. So each time we hear God’s word in the scriptures God is there for us and with us. The scripture intimately speaks to our lives in the present as the transforming power of the Holy Spirit is still working in and through the lives of those who hear. The Gospel, ‘Good News’, is still being unlocked and unfolded through our lives in the present. The Spirit is still unfolding in the ‘now’ of the ministry and mission fields we have the privilege to called to serve in and in the blessed encounters with those we are fortunate to journey with.

Luke 24:28-32: As they drew near the village they were heading for, Jesus made as if to go on further. But they prevailed upon him “Stay with us, for night comes quickly. The day is almost over.” So He went in to stay with them. When they were at table, He took break, said a blessing, broke it and gave each a piece. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him; but He vanished out of their sight.

Jesus could have continued on; the Greek word used is *prospiro* “make or act as though, pretend”. You don’t just invite yourself to dinner or impose yourself that is the host’s prerogative. There was not an expectation but an openness to an invitation.

The themes of hospitality and welcome are throughout the bible. In the Old Testament hospitality often brought people into a direct contact with God who was in the form of the stranger and in Luke’s gospel the theme runs through that God is visiting his people in the person of Christ and it is the outcasts, sinners and those on the margins who take up the opportunity to accept Jesus and invite him in.

Jim Bowen breaks this theme down to three main dimensions:

1. **God’s welcome** – God’s posture, as Jesus shows it over and over again, is one of welcome to human kind (Lk 9:11, 15:2, etc.)
2. **Us welcoming God** - When the New Testament observes anyone engaged in ‘welcoming’, is not just a sociological statement but also a theological one. The welcome means that the welcomer has welcomed God’s grace (Lk 19:5, Mtt 10:40, Jn 13:20, Gal 4:14).
3. **Us welcoming each other** – When we welcome others we are representing God who welcomed others without reserve. There is something sacramental about the act of welcome (Lk 14:12-14; Rom 15:7; Acts 28:20).

The act of hospitality in this story ushers the scene of the meal which is considered the climax of this event. Our faith therefore must have the hospitality of Christ at its core and this hospitality and welcome will create the environment for the kingdom of God to be realised and alive, and where the good news of the living, loving God is experienced.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus associated with sinners; He stood shoulder to shoulder in the muddy waters of the Jordan with those seeking forgiveness through the baptism of John; on many occasions He ate and drank with disreputable types; at the end of his life He was crucified between two thieves. Jesus was constantly willing to move into their world and journey with them and to engage with them on their terms. So the living out of our faith is not about standing aloof from the experience of others, passing easy judgement on them or praying for them from a distance. It is not about standing rooted and immobile in one place being frustrated and indignant that ‘they are not coming to me’. On the contrary it is about daring to actively immerse one’s self in the other’s story, walking, journeying with them, to walk in their shoes and about daring to feel the texture of their experience.

It was in the sharing of this meal, in the 'breaking of the bread' that the disciples at Emmaus recognised Jesus with them. Before this they were unable to recognise Jesus who was right there in their midst. Therefore, we as a Eucharistic people, become Christ present in the world, sharing in the paschal mystery, sent forth to make present the kingdom of God – a mission of justice, compassion, mercy and love. True Eucharist, true communion could only happen after everything else had happened. It was not the starting point but an authentic celebration of where they were now at on their journey – the liturgy of their life, their story.

"In the humble signs of bread and wine, changed into his body and blood, Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey, and He enables us to become, for everyone, witnesses of hope."

Jesus now disappears as the disciples become Christ for others.

Luke 24:32-35: And they said to each other, "Were not our Hearts filled with ardent yearning when He was talking to us on the road and explaining the scriptures?" They immediately set out and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were greeted by these words "Yes, it is true, the Lord is risen! He has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the road and how Jesus made himself known when He broke bread with them."

This mystical experience with the stranger, revealed in the breaking of bread as the risen Christ compelled them to run, return immediately to Jerusalem, the place that had been a few hours earlier their place of pain and isolation. They returned renewed, re-joining with the disciples to share the good news. Their personal experience with the Risen Jesus compelled them to be disciples to others, to share the 'Good News'. Their hopelessness and Heartache is turned into hope and courage. It is this transforming, dynamic encounter that leads us back into mission and forms the basis of the call to live out our faith as each encounter with the stranger is an encounter with the risen Christ that empowers, enlivens and transforms, making present and accessible the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed and began.

Jesus did not set out a dictum in the New Testament for the setting up an organisation of a church of followers: He attracted followers and sent out these followers enlivened with a mission, his mission, to make known and make present the reign of God or to make known and allow people to experience God's will for the world. Through the resurrection and our baptism we are called into full membership of this body and mission of the risen Christ and it is this encounter and experience that the faith community, the people of God, has to facilitate. It has to be a representation of and catalyst for an encounter with the risen Christ who is there with us even when we do not realise it.

For the disciples on the journey to Emmaus it was through hospitality to the stranger, listening to the word and breaking the bread that the unexpected occurred and their faith was challenged and renewed. In sharing the meal with the 'stranger' they were transformed from sadness, foolishness and slowness of Heart to joy, insight and re-commitment.

Closing thought:

Core to this understanding is the encounter with the risen Christ in the immediacy of human experience mediated through scripture and tradition. Christ who is present to us always, even when we are not present to Him, and whose message of love and hope transforms the darkest of desolation. We need to see and feel that suffering and death is not the end but it is the resurrection that is the fulfilment of God's plan. Jesus turned aside to remain with us and to show us that there is life beyond death and a road beyond our lost hopes. He makes Himself known to all through the love of His community, the Church – the community of faith. There is a call to the collaboration and fullness of participation of all in this mystery through the rediscovery and reclamation of baptism as the ordination to ministry which gives equality to all members of the people of God. Through the scripture, tradition and revelation of His Spirit continually at work in the world, revealing this saving plan; through the welcoming and hospitality to the stranger and through the mystery of the bread broken and wine shared, we join in the shared ministry of Jesus.

As Theresa of Avila reminds us, this is the good news we need and which we need to share with others. It remains for me to be His hands and feet; alive to walk beside others where they are and reach out to their need even though at times my limbs and theirs may be scarred by the wounds of the cross. It remains for me to be His voice; teaching the word, encouraging one another, empowering and animating others, praising God and blessing creation and declaring God's undying love through the living out of my faith even though at times my voice may have an ache of agony and grief. As the resurrected Christ has turned aside for me, so I must turn aside to share his living love with others and

make known the good news of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of compassion and love, sharing the joy of that good news that I experienced so that others may also feel their Hearts burning within them. And in this I am never alone. It is only with the grace of God who is ever present to me even though I am not always present to God and with the support of others. In this is my understanding of the challenge to live out my faith; if the living out of my faith is, at a minimum, only to help create an environment, a welcome that enables people to personally encounter the God who loves, cares and intimately walks your journey with you , then it is a God experience.