

Luke 24: 13 - 35 Walk to Emmaus - Year A - Third Sunday of Easter

On 12 January 2007, a camera in an arcade above a Washington metro station captured this scene. In commuter rush hour, a casually dressed man begins to busk with a violin. He plays for approx 45 mins, during which time approximately 1000 people walk past. Of those, about seven people stop to listen for a few minutes, twenty seven give money. When the man finishes, he has made about \$32. The man in question is Joshua Bell, one of the most celebrated violinists of our time. Three days before, he had sold out a concert hall in Boston where the cheap seats cost \$100 minimum. However, during this performance in the arcade, only one person recognised who he was, and that was right at the very end. Because it's all about context and experience isn't it.

While we are hurrying from home to work, we never expect to see a world class violinist busking. It is beyond our experience of how the world operates, it wasn't in expected context. And while we are hurrying from Jerusalem to Emmaus, we don't expect to see a dead man alive and walking, and talking, and sitting down to supper.

Luke is the only gospel writer to present this story - the walk to Emmaus. Two people, a man named Cleopas and his unnamed companion, some say another male companion, others say possibly his wife (as women were not usually considered significant enough for their names to be recorded) are traveling the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus. It is a physical journey, moving from one location to another. However, it is so much more than that. These companions are trying to move away from a place of confusion, sorrow and pain into a space that offers the reassuringly familiar.

Frederick Buechner describes Emmaus well: Emmaus is whatever we do, or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest, bravest, and loveliest, decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that we have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish [people] for selfish ends.

We all have our own Emmaus' don't we? Where we go to to help us deal with the terrible, the inexplicable. It could be church, or the psychiatrist, family and friends. For others it is the the shopping mall, the fridge, the bottle, the internet - or a combination of any of these. And so much in life can trigger our journey to Emmaus.

For these two companions it is the crucifixion of a potential Messiah and then a bewildering, fanciful tale that he has been raised from death to life. Yet these companions cannot even entertain the possibility that it might be true. It is a happening even beyond their capacity to imagine. It is too painful, too raw to stay and wait in that uncomfortable space and see how it unfolds. They turn away and leave.

When the stranger arrives and begins to accompany them, their grief is palpable. After gentle prompting the companions begin to talk - and note these three tiny words - "we had hoped". There are millions of stories behind those three tiny words aren't there? "We had hoped...they wouldn't split up. We had hoped...I wouldn't lose my job. We had hoped...the treatment would work. We had hoped..." We all bring our own stories to these words and we have all listened to the stories of others. Hopes dashed, outcomes too terrible to think about - so we try to leave them behind, move away from the source of pain.

Note the response of the stranger: he lets them speak, he doesn't interject, he doesn't correct them, he just listens to their story. The stranger, as Brendan Byrne beautifully puts it, shows respect for the human experience. They are given the time and the space to speak out their pain. That need to try to make sense of the inexplicable.

And then the stranger begins to speak, "Oh how foolish you are". OK, not the best start, we didn't learn that in pastoral care 101. But what he then does, using the sacred scriptures is put their story into a bigger context. How this story is woven into the very fabric of God's interactions with his people. The stranger shows them that in the sacred texts there are keys which might help unlock the central mysteries and even help them to find truth and hope.

What they are shown is God's unexpected narrative. Like everyone else in Israel, the two companions had been reading the Bible through the wrong end of the telescope. They had always viewed it as the story of how God would redeem Israel from suffering, when in fact it was the story of how God would redeem Israel through suffering. The suffering of the Messiah, the suffering of Jesus.

This is one periscope through which to view the story of why Cleopas and his companion failed to recognise the stranger as Jesus. It is because they couldn't recognise the events that had taken place as part of God's redemptive plan. We all have our own narratives, individual and collective, of, how things should be. And we are completely thrown when we are presented with another narrative, when the

story takes an unexpected turn. We even think God must be absent from some narratives because they don't turn out how we are taught to believe they should.

So the companions reach what they believe is their destination and invite, in fact, urge, the stranger to join them. Note that the stranger had acted as if to go on. He will not impose himself on the disciples, then or now: he waits for an invitation to remain with them. He always does, he is never a bully.

So Jesus enters the house as a guest and becomes the Host. At the table he takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread to his companions on the way. On the road he had already broken open the Scriptures for them and these ritual actions at supper complete the revelation. Their eyes are opened and they finally recognise Jesus, as he truly is, then he vanishes from their sight.

Emmaus has now become the place of conversion, of broken people healed by the broken word and broken bread. These actions have triggered recognition of the risen Christ who reveals himself to them in Scripture and Eucharist and hospitality. The ways in which he reveals himself to us when we gather.

Yet that is not the end point of the Emmaus story or indeed our own story. Like the two companions, encounters with Jesus give us strength to go back out into the world, perhaps back to our own Jerusalems!: situations of confusion and sorrow we have walked away from. With the presence of the risen Christ burning courage and hope into our hearts, we are empowered to speak of the times we didn't recognise, until later, that he was in fact always with us. Speak of the ways he has made himself known to us in countless ways. As he will make himself known to us again today in the Eucharist.

God be with you on your journeys.