

Hearts strangely warmed

27 April 2014

Luke 24: 13-35

This passage is a real 'before and after' story, for those two disciples, who went from the depths of human despair and disappointment to the joy of certainty that Jesus was alive and with them.

When I was thinking about this I put 'before and after' into my computer search engine and in what is probably a comment on our society (not my previous searches I should add) most of the images it suggested to illustrate 'before and after' involved cosmetic surgery or dieting and I had to keep looking to find this image which for me is a better 'before and after' picture for the change that Jesus brings. He changes dry, unproductive, unattractive lives into lives characterised by new growth, visible attractiveness not just on the surface but with roots, and lives with potential for more growth through the Holy Spirit. Jesus brings the continual growth and conversion of a garden.

So let's look at what happened to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They started the walk feeling low, and actually physically turning and walking away from the place that represented all their disappointment and loss. The conversation they have with the apparent stranger who joins them reveals a lot about how they are feeling:

- They were sad – in v. 17 we read that their faces were downcast;
- They felt let down by someone they had trusted and put their faith in; in v. 21 one of them says: 'we *had* hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel' – note the past tense, their hope had died.
- And perhaps their sadness was tinged with bitterness – when they told the stranger what other people were saying they sound sceptical to me: In v. 22-23 they reported the resurrection sightings but in a way that implied that this had made no impact on them personally. V 22 says: '...some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.' There is no excitement and belief in those sentences and if there had been, surely they would have staying in Jerusalem celebrating? Those are not the words of someone who was convinced that Jesus was alive.

Yet, while they were in that frame of mind, Jesus came to them and spoke with. He came to find them even though they had given up looking for him. It is instructive to look at the way he came to them when they were stuck in negativity and confusion, and even bitterness and scepticism. Because he still comes looking for people.

Firstly Jesus came and walked with them, beside them. This time he wasn't the centre of attention in a parade as he had been on Palm Sunday; he was just another traveller walking like everyone else in a very ordinary way. One commentator has described him as being 'comradely', which has connotations of being with them as an equal, a friend, a brother, a fellow-traveller.

Secondly he was a sympathetic listener. He knew everything about them, but he asked them questions. In one of my Bibles (and you may have one like this) the words spoken by Jesus are printed in red and everything else is in black. If I look at the three red passages in this reading the first two are questions that Jesus asked: In v. 17 he says 'What are you discussing together as you walk along?' and when they tell him, in v. 19 he asks again, 'what things?' We'll come to the third red passage later. It's important for us to remember that Jesus, Lord of the Universe, all-knowing and all-powerful, also cares about us – our ordinary lives, struggles and preoccupations, our deepest feelings and doubts and worries – and he has the time and the desire to hear about them. We can come to him in prayer and pour it all out and Jesus will not reject or misunderstand us. We can think of him as the ultimate sympathetic listener.

But he wasn't just a listener who left the disciples where they were either, in their confusion and sadness (self-pity?). He pointed them to Scripture: in v. 27 we read that he 'explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself'. He showed them again the promises and plans of God. This is where the third passage in red comes in, and in a way Jesus' words become quite harsh. In v. 25 he says 'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' He certainly wasn't beating about the bush when he called them foolish and slow of heart to believe!

Jesus listened to their human perspective on what had happened – but then it's as if he wanted to reach out and pull them out of the sad, sceptical, disappointed, bitter mud where that human way of thinking had left them wallowing around and getting nowhere – he wanted to pull them into a new way of seeing and a place of cleanliness and freedom.

Maybe there are times when everyone, those who have never met Jesus and those who have already committed their lives to him, like these two disciples, can get stuck in the mud of a human way of thinking, and Jesus might even call us foolish and slow of heart to believe? But he will not leave us like that, he will reach out and urge us to take the only action that will ever get us out of it – to open our arms and hearts and minds and every part of us to *him* and allow *him* to save us.

It's interesting that even in this 'before' part of the story, before the two disciples knew who he was, they wanted this apparent stranger to stay with them, even though he had called them foolish! In v. 29 we read that they 'urged him strongly, stay with us for it is nearly evening, the day is almost over'. They still didn't consciously know who he was, but they wanted more of his presence.

And so, in an ordinary meal, in an ordinary house, we come to the moment of transformation when everything changed for those two disciples from before to after. There are two aspects of this moment we can learn from:

Firstly, it is the ordinariness of the setting. Bible scholars tell us from the language being used that this was not a religious ceremony or even a home communion meal. It was an ordinary supper, but when they saw Jesus breaking bread and giving thanks

we read in v. 31 that their eyes were opened and they recognised him. Note that Jesus didn't undergo any kind of transformation or appear any different – it was the two disciples who changed.

You may have seen television programmes like the Secret Millionaire or Undercover Boss, in which people disguise themselves and go and live alongside supposedly 'ordinary' residents or employees who they would not normally meet? People are told that some kind of documentary is being made, but not that the new employee with a hat or wig is their chief executive or local millionaire. I'm not quite sure how set-up these programmes are, but usually the new and slightly hopeless person in disguise is treated with great tolerance and kindness as they learn to clean toilets or serve fast food or do other sorts of ordinary things. Then at the end of the programme there is a scene of revelation when the undercover person reveals who they are and writes out big cheques for good causes. Maybe I'm sentimental but I find these scenes quite poignant, because I want to believe in the goodness and compassion and generosity of people to each other, when they know each other's stories and their struggles.

So how much more poignant and emotional must it have been for the two disciples when they recognised Jesus? All of a sudden their shattered hopes and dreams were put back together, not just as they had been before but even better – because their hope was now fulfilled: Jesus was alive after being dead, and everything foretold in Scripture had come true. As we sang earlier 'Jesus who died, now glorified.' The impact of the resurrection and the presence of their living Lord changed everything for them – as it does for everyone who experiences that moment of recognition of Jesus when our eyes are opened and we acknowledge him as our Lord and saviour.

It is conversion from a life stuck in the 'before' of human *existence* to a life with Jesus at the centre, and I believe that because we remain human it is a continual conversion until we die and, in the words of our pastor, 'go to glory' ourselves.

There are two body parts referred to in this passage – and in both cases there is a before and after description.

The primary way that most of us recognise people is with our eyes, but on the road, in v. 16 we read that the disciples 'were kept from recognising' Jesus. So their eyes were somehow, spiritually, not working as they normally would. There was something blocking their view of Jesus, and it was something inside them, not Jesus hiding behind a disguise. But when 'he took bread, broke it, gave thanks and began to give it to them' their eyes were opened (v. 31) and they recognised him. Through the Holy Spirit our eyes are opened to recognise Jesus – it's the Spirit who acts in power, but it's in our lives that the change happens. If we ask, the Holy Spirit can take down barriers in our lives and our ways of seeing, so that we can really see Jesus and have that close, loving and overwhelming relationship with Jesus that I believe we all crave.

And then the passage mentions hearts. As he talked to them on the road Jesus accused the disciples of being 'slow of heart to believe' but when they recognised Jesus they said to each other 'were not our hearts burning within us while he talked

with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?' Not their minds or their emotions, but their hearts burned.

The feeling in their hearts is translated in various ways: hearts burning within, hearts on fire, hearts glowing, hearts ablaze, and it's the Living Bible that translates it 'hearts strangely warmed' which is the title I was given for this service.

That phrase 'hearts strangely warmed' is often associated with the conversion of John Wesley. He recorded in his journal what happened to him on the 24th May 1738, when he was 34:

'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while (the leader) was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'

I like knowing that he went very unwillingly to church, although he had been a Christian for many years, but when he felt assured that his sins were forgiven and that he could trust in Christ, his heart was strangely warmed. It was a pivotal moment in Wesley's life after which he was never the same again.

This is the first of a new series of Sunday morning themes which take us from Easter to Pentecost, with the overall title 'Spirit without Measure', with the purpose of seeing again that the Holy Spirit is utterly essential to all aspects of Christian life and discipleship. We see the Spirit acting in the lives of the two disciples who walked to Emmaus to bring about the transforming moment of conversion. And the Spirit can act in our lives not just once but over and over again to turn us to a deeper relationship with the living Jesus.

The transformation experienced by the two disciples is shown by the fruits of the Spirit and immediately afterwards we can see this in the joy that characterises their subsequent actions.

The joy in their hearts started when they encountered Jesus, even before they recognised him, but once they knew who he was and knew he was alive and with them, their joy was irrepressible. Their response was to turn round and walk the 7 miles back to Jerusalem, find other believers and share the truth that they were convinced of. The joy of Jesus' presence did not leave them, even though physically he disappeared, but through the Holy Spirit it continued with them.

The joy of Easter is not just for a day or a long weekend but joy that comes from the Holy Spirit in our hearts now and every day of our lives.

There are plenty of references in Scripture about joy after sorrow, which was the experience of those two disciples, and that is a word of hope for all of us. The message of Easter is that God does not leave us wallowing in mud of human disappointments and scepticism, but through the resurrection of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit he lifts us into the joy of being with him.

And in the first draft of this sermon that is where it ended, because I do believe that is the word from God to us today: To grasp hold of the joy of giving our lives to Jesus and allowing the Holy Spirit to warm our hearts with that joy. But then I read on in John Wesley's journal and realised that being joyful is not so simple – we can't just tell each other to have joy from the Holy Spirit and expect everything to be easy after that. On the very same day that he described how his heart had been warmed by the Spirit, Wesley wrote:

... it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?" Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth, them according to the counsels of His own will.'

God created us with emotions and we cannot hang on to one emotion all the time whatever the circumstances, but as Jesus told those two disciples we can always turn to Scripture and be assured of the promises of God, the hope he has fulfilled in Jesus' death for us, and the joy he will bring.

Last Sunday evening one of the members of the Oasis café church congregation read out Isaiah 35, a passage which affirms the joy that will come to those who are redeemed. Let us listen again to those words of hope and promise from Scripture. These are selected verses from Isaiah 35:

The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy....

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,
'Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;

with divine retribution
he will come to save you.'

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.....

But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the LORD has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Can I remind you that if you would like to pray with someone individually now the prayer ministry team will be here at the front and would be very pleased to pray with you or talk with you.

Let us sing 'O let the Son of God enfold you, with his Spirit and his love, let him fill your heart and satisfy your soul.'