

Emmaus: life lived as eucharist
Easter 3: April 30 2017
Revd Jenny Wilkens
Luke 24: 13-35



To begin with I must apologise if I have a slightly glazed look today, some of you know that my apartment is currently undergoing double glazing which I'm sure will be very good once it's finished, but at the moment I have a couple of workmen popping up all over my house carrying windows, doors and drills! Whatever room I settle in with my laptop seems to be the room they just need to be in at that moment....it's a good reminder for one who's got very used to living in her own space, that life in community, for whatever length of time, involves plenty of give and take, and church life is no different!

Today's well-known and well-loved Gospel takes us back to Easter day and to the beginnings of the infant church community. The Emmaus road story paints for us a vivid picture of two disciples, Cleopas and the other disciple unnamed. Most art pictures this as being two male disciples, but it's quite possible the other disciple was Cleopas' wife, perhaps the Mary described as 'wife of Clopas' in John's gospel (19:25).

They too have a somewhat glazed expression, but theirs is the numbness of deep grief, their loss of their rabbi, the one they followed to Jerusalem, and as they express so poignantly "we had hoped...", the loss of their hopes that the one they recognised as a prophet was also Messiah and redeemer of Israel. I have been reading this week Henri Nouwen's book based on the Emmaus journey, called "With burning hearts: a meditation on the eucharistic life"¹. He traces 5 stages in the journey to Emmaus: *mourning our losses; discerning the presence; inviting the stranger; entering into communion and going on a mission*. He then sees parallels between these stages in the story and the progression of the liturgy of the eucharist.

Our eucharist begins early on with *mourning our losses* - our confession of our failures, the 'we had hoped's when we have failed to reach our potential or fulfil our hopes as individuals or as a community, culminating with our prayer, 'Lord, have mercy'.

Then secondly we seek to *discern the presence* of Christ with us through hearing the Scriptures, searching within the written word for the Word made flesh, Jesus who can open us up beyond our limited and often downcast vision, to the bigger picture of God's purposes for the salvation of the world in Christ, and our role as the body of Christ here and now.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *With burning hearts: a meditation on the eucharistic life*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2003.

But Jesus doesn't pull any punches as he does so, recall his words to those two disciples: 'oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe...'. Perhaps that phrase 'slow of heart' is worth dwelling on, for later we will hear those same disciples say, 'were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us? Perhaps we often think of the readings and sermon as stuff to listen to, to apply in our lives later on, but actually God's word to us is sacramental, it is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), convicting, creative, accomplishing God's purposes (Isaiah 55:11), looking to warm hearts that are cold and slow, healing us, transforming us, bringing us to new life, new hope, new perspective. So does God's Word made flesh, Jesus make himself present to us as teacher, healer, judge, Saviour.

The third stage of the journey is *inviting the stranger*: that intriguing point in the story where they reach the village of Emmaus, but Jesus 'walked ahead as if he were going on'. It's tantalising, isn't it, as to what he is doing here, but it is enough to catalyse the two disciples into action, into response: they urged him strongly, 'Stay with us'. There is the invitation, taking the risk of inviting this stranger into the intimacy of their home and lives, offering the gifts of hospitality, table fellowship and friendship. I heard an interesting conversation the other day at a conference where someone who's only just arrived in this country was asking the speaker about how to thrive in this country. And I found the speaker's reply to him quite blunt, but worth pondering. The speaker, a Kiwi himself, said Kiwis are known as being friendly but tend to be inhospitable – we value our independence, our rugged individualism and being self-sufficient, and so are slow to open our homes, our real lives, our vulnerabilities to others. But, the speaker continued, accept every gift you are offered, be willing to receive from the Kiwis you meet, and you will find that they warm to you.

Where does Henri Nouwen find the invitation to 'stay with us' in the liturgy? Interesting enough, he finds it in the Creed. He feels that when we say the Creed together, it is not just an intellectual statement we are subscribing to, muttering under our breath the bits that we struggle to believe in. Rather he sees the Creed as expressing our trust, our commitment to a relationship with God that goes beyond that of polite but distant strangers to an ongoing and growing friendship, one that has all the rough and tumble and tussling of real human friendships. And the Creed said corporately, together, is our commitment to the rough and tumble, the ups and downs of the church family, the sharing of our joys and sorrows, our hopes and frustrations, our laughter and tears.

The fourth stage of the journey is *Entering into communion* where the one whom the 2 disciples have invited as a guest turns the table on them and takes on the role of host. “He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.” Those oh so familiar words from the Last Supper ‘This is my body, given for you...this cup that is poured out for you is my blood’ (Luke 22:19). “Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he vanished from their sight”. We can think how frustrating that must have been for them, to have just grasped who it is and he disappears. But perhaps something deeper is at play here. Nouwen puts it this way: ‘When they eat the bread he gives them and they recognise him, that recognition is a deep spiritual awareness that now he dwells in their innermost being, he breathes in them, speaks in them, yes, lives in them...their lives are transformed into his life, it is no longer they who live but Christ who lives in them.’² And that spiritual communion is so deep, so intimate, that their bodily senses can no longer discern him, he is beyond sight or touch in a depth of communion that earthly powers cannot reach, that the powers of evil and death cannot harm.

But that communion with Christ is not given for us to clutch to ourselves, first of all that *communion* with Christ creates *community* with others. Do you notice how now these 2 disciples are at one with each other, each of them is united with Christ in his body and blood, and so each of them is bound to the other. “We who are many are one body because we all share the one bread”.

Communion with Christ creates *community* with others which then leads to *mission*, and that’s the final stage of the story. Those 2 disciples, fired up by their encounter with the risen Christ, go back to Jerusalem at a cracking pace to share the good news. I’ve always found it rather touching that they are promptly upstaged by the other disciples who by now have had their own encounters and good news to share, and perhaps that’s a reminder that mission is not just giving our pennyworth, but also receiving the gifts of others as well. In time the Emmaus disciples do get to speak and I like the New Jerusalem Bible translation that says “they told *their story* of what happened on the road”. Each of us has our story to tell, so often we Anglicans are scared of words like mission or evangelism, but at its simplest, it is ‘telling our story’ of our encounters with the risen Christ.

Nouwen’s 5 stages in the journey to Emmaus: *mourning our losses; discerning the presence; inviting the stranger; entering into communion* and *going on a mission*. The 5 stages of our liturgy of the eucharist: mourning our losses in the Confession, discerning the presence of Christ in the Word,

² Henri Nouwen, *ibid*, p.92.

inviting the stranger as we say yes to relationship with God in the Creed, entering into communion as we feed on the body and blood of Christ and form the new community of the body of Christ, who are then sent out on mission together.

As we come to our AGM today, we give thanks to God for the body of Christ here through the years, and we pray for our community now in all its uncertainties, hopes and frailties.

May we seek to live together into Christ's eucharistic life, that our communion in Christ will lead to recognising Christ in each other.

And as we are sent out on mission together, into a world that feels at the moment full of losses and short on hope, may we bring the hope that is within us: 'Christ in us, the hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27). Amen.