

An Eastertide sermon preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, on the Second Sunday after Easter (4 May) 2014, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

‘When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight.’ (Luke 24:30-31)

I think it’s my personal favourite of all the resurrection narratives, that account we just heard of the disciples travelling to Emmaus. The Orkney poet George Mackay Brown cast it into verse about twenty years ago, in a poem written in the voice of ‘A Landlady in Emmaus.’ Her lodgers are ordinary working people called Tom and Ed, and they’d taken up with a travelling preacher who was accused of being a terrorist and was put to death. A few days after the execution, Tom and Ed invite a stranger to join them at home for dinner. It’s a man they’d met on the road – and they ask him to say grace before they eat. The landlady says,

I didn’t like it, a stranger
They’d given a lift to on the dark road.
You never know who’s a spy or informer
Nowadays, and the man’s head was hooded

Tom said, ‘You’re welcome. Break the bread.’
The words of blessing
Came like the first and the last music.
He stretched out a wounded hand
To the loaf on the plate.

The hood of his cloak falls back and in what the Landlady sees, she recognises the Holy of Holies: ‘I saw then,’ she says, ‘The crusted ore and rubies at the temple.’¹

Part of what makes the Emmaus story powerful is its irony. Not only are the disciples speaking to Jesus without knowing it’s him, they are speaking *about* him, telling him his own story, at least as much as they know of it. Shakespeare sets up scenes like this. In *Henry the Fifth*, on the night before the Battle of Agincourt, the King goes cloaked and unrecognised, talking with his troops. They don’t know it’s him, but they are talking to the King and talking *about* him. The same again in *Measure for Measure*: the Duke is going around disguised as a Friar, and he ends up in a conversation about himself, with Lucio, a character who has no idea that it’s the Duke he’s talking to. There, the result is absurd and comical; in Luke’s Gospel the result is absurd and transformational.

The disciples are joined by this stranger, who asks what they are talking about. But the arrival in Jerusalem of Jesus, and his crucifixion, is the biggest news story of the moment. They are amazed that the stranger has to ask. Is he that ignorant? ‘Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have happened there?’ Then a restrained, minimalist reply from Jesus. ‘What things?’ In response to that question they launch off into the whole story, telling Jesus about his own ministry, his condemnation to death, his crucifixion, and their bitter disappointment, because they had expected him to be the liberator

¹ ‘A Landlady in Emmaus,’ in George Mackay Brown, *Following a Lark: Poems* (London: John Murray, 1996), pp. 65-67.

of Israel. Then the bizarre news of that same day, that his body – wherever it might be – is not in the tomb; and the even more bizarre report that some women who went to the tomb that morning had seen a vision, telling them he was alive. The reality of his death they are sure of. Likewise the emptiness of the tomb. But the rumour of life and hope hasn't really convinced them. Maybe they wouldn't connect the dots themselves if they could: it was doubtless too good to be true, and they had seen too much horror to be foolishly optimistic. This is where the stranger comes into his own, and he explains the story of Jesus to them – unlike the disciples, we know he's explaining his *own* story – telling them what it means, showing that what seems too good to be true - is real.

They persuade him to stop with them at Emmaus, where the rumour of life is confirmed in their own presence. At supper the stranger says the blessing, breaks the bread, gives it to them: 'And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight.' To us it may seem like one of those bittersweet dreams in which we are face to face with a loved one who has died. There they are before us, alive and well again, looking at us, so real – but it turns out *not* to be real. The vision fades; we wake to find it was only a dream. The disciples' experience here is quite different from that. They have been walking with this man on the road, probably for hours; he's just been with them at a real table breaking real bread for their dinner. He has vanished from their sight but they are still at that table themselves, and each has seen what the other has seen. Now they connect the dots, to the prophecies of Scripture. And to those wild assertions that Christ is alive. That God is stronger than death. They know it now. They have seen him, after that brutal killing by crucifixion, alive again. And we should notice that their reaction is not to grieve that he's vanished from their sight; they have stopped looking backwards now. Their reaction is to forget all about whatever need they had to be in Emmaus – to forget about sleep – to get their things together at that moment and set off again, on the seven-mile return journey back to Jerusalem, to tell the others that their liberator is alive.

The enemy he has defeated is not, of course, the occupying power by whose agents he was put to death. It wasn't in that sense that he came to redeem Israel. What he has defeated is the power of death itself. And with it:

- the power of every negation of true hope;
- the power not only of crucifixion but of every form of brutality meant to break and destroy the human spirit;
- the power not just of Judas's betrayal, but of every betrayal of love and trust, from the beginning of history till its end;
- the power of all human sin, including our own – in the past, present, or future.

Christ's victory does not mean these things cease to exist, nor that their effect is no longer damaging or wicked. But his victory does mean that we need not be afraid, because in him, God has faced down evil at its worst; God has faced down death itself; and his resurrection proclaims that in all things (however cruel or tragic) the last word belongs, not to death, but to life. Christ's victory sets us free; and in breaking bread with him, as we will in this service, we celebrate that freedom – today and always.

The image of Christ as liberator is beautifully drawn in the Orthodox icon which I've brought along today, especially meaningful in the Easter season – have a closer look when you come up at Communion time. It shows the Lord's descent to 'the realm of death,' to Hades, to raise up Adam and Eve, archetypal man, archetypal woman, whom we see him lifting out of their tombs. His feet are planted on the broken gates of Hades (in this representation the broken gates assume the shape of a cross), and if you look very closely into the darkness below you can see a discarded key, pieces of broken hinges, chains, locks. With his right hand Christ reaches out, grabbing Adam firmly by the wrist, pulling him up. In his left hand he holds a scroll, the good news he has to proclaim to 'the spirits in prison' – this refers to a mysterious verse in the First Letter of Peter (3:19) which is usually taken to refer to the dead who lived before the time of Christ. Representatives of that group appear in the icon, Kings like David and Solomon. St John Baptist often appears too – here, he is the first standing figure to the left of Christ – and there seem to be more contemporary people to the right, showing the power of the resurrection to be timeless, showing it to be an event which continues to happen here and now, not just two thousand years ago, but today and always.

Might we take the presence of these onlookers and imprisoned souls, ancient and contemporary, as an invitation to put ourselves in the icon too? Just as we might put ourselves into the Emmaus story? Making ourselves present and available to Christ, so that he can touch us and raise us to newness of life? As Rowan Williams says, 'It is when his hand touches us that something new becomes possible.'² It's a touch that has power to redeem 'the first' – and every – 'moment of rebellion and false direction in human life,' 'whatever sin and self-destructiveness we have been involved in.' It's a pledge that the work has begun, that 'he has already sown in us the seeds that will come to new life.'³

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tomb bestowing life. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.

² See the chapter on 'The Resurrection' (pp. 21-41), in Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), see p. 28.

³ Williams, pp. 37, 38-39.