

from crisis to peace

a sermon preached on the
third sunday of easter

30 April 2017

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by father john stewart

the lections: Acts 2: 14a, 36-41; Psalm 116: 1-14, 11-18; 1 Peter 1:13-25; Luke 24: 13-35

Today this parish community gathers seeking to come to terms with the news that the Vicar is away for a time on stress leave. After our worship we will gather for sharing, listening to each other, and taking responsibility together for finding the way forward.

And as a companion for us in this venture the Lectionary gives us today the monumental story of the experience of the disciples on the first Easter day from Luke's gospel chapter 24. As we begin might I remind us that we do not come to these stories to get information about historical events. Nor do we seek biographical information about Jesus. Our task each week is to consider these stories as our guidebook, our map for our daily journey here and now.

This passage we have just heard is a story about a community in crisis. They have been shattered by the death of Jesus. He was the one they put their hopes in – he was the Messiah they had longed for. Now dead and gone. He wasn't who they thought he was. Peter had shown signs of being a good leader even though he frequently put his foot in his mouth. But now he has publicly denied he even knew Jesus. Peter wasn't who they thought he was. Judas was a good guy – and now they are coming to terms with his betrayal of Jesus for payment. Judas wasn't who they thought he was. The women are in crisis because they found themselves alone at the cross – the big brave men couldn't bring themselves to turn up. And earlier in the day some women discover that Jesus' body has disappeared from the tomb – they tell the men the news about his being raised to life and the men don't believe them. None of the men turn out to be who they thought they were. Relationships are fractured, broken. They are all experiencing anger, disappointment, shock, confusion. The tension is so unbearable two of them leave the others and go for a walk.

One of them is named as Cleopas, it is possible the other one was Luke himself, although it may have been the wife of Cleopas who was one of the women who had been at the cross. As they walk they are desperately trying to make sense of it. They have had dreams, they thought they knew the others – all of it turns out to be illusion. So the work is for them to be dis-illusioned. To come to a deeper sense of reality. They seek to escape from the pain, the trauma, the despair.

This is what we call the journey of liminality. From one place to another. From the place of “no longer” to the place of “not yet”. It is a familiar part of the human journey. Adolescence (no longer a child, not yet an adult), betrothal (no longer single and available, not yet committed and married), theological training (no longer a lay person, not yet an ordained person) are some examples of this liminal place. In the world of nature one example is the earth bound caterpillar who spins a cocoon around itself and after a huge metamorphosis, transformation, emerges as a beautiful butterfly soaring into the sky. The time in the cocoon is its liminal journey – no longer the caterpillar – not yet the butterfly. It is the place that is betwixt and between. It has its own complex feelings and thoughts, and its own important work to for us to attend to.

Notice how the risen Christ accompanies these two disciples on their liminal journey. They are going back over the shocking events and trying to make sense of it. It is there that Christ turns up – in the times and places which we experience as the most disturbing and confronting. But they are not ready for the new, not open to this possibility (*but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (v 15, 16)*). Yet he walks with them and invites them to tell their story.

Often when we re-tell our story we find a way of re-shaping it, or finding a different perspective on it. Theirs is a story of the high hopes they had, the dream they had followed, the grief they now experience – this is about the death of their dream. They are expressing grief in this time of darkness and it is accompanied by shame and blame: blaming Jesus because he has turned out to be other than they hoped for, and shame about themselves because they have turned out to be other than they hoped for (vv 19-24). This is the place to be dis-illusioned, that is to have our illusions stripped away so we can enter more into reality. We can be opened up to a truth that sets us free and brings us to a new space.

And then he senses they are ready to hear what he has to say. He reminds them of what they already know. *Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures (v 27)*. He places their story in the context of the wider story of the scriptures. In this light suffering and death did not destroy messianic credentials but confirmed them within the wider plan of God. All that has happened can be seen as held within a plan of God that greatly outstrips their previous expectation. Their question had been the question we all travel with – What is God up to? They couldn't see that these events were showing them more of God's plan and purpose – they could not see the activity of God.

Christ's approach gradually closes the gap between expectation and reality. The two disciples experience a burning in their hearts (v 32) as their hope is rekindled. In the context of the shared meal their eyes are opened to the deeper meaning of what their hearts have been telling them. Scripture is expounded in such a way as to help them find integration between their previous hopes and the reality of their lives. At the meal the guest becomes the host. He who is receiving their hospitality provides the hospitality of God.

And the penny finally drops – they get it. And Christ vanishes. They can now trust their own experience. In the hospitality of the table, the familiar, the Spirit moves powerfully. *Did not our hearts move within us (v 32)* is the key to the movement of the Spirit.

We need to be attending to our burning heart moments – our patterns of grace and resistance. We need to learn to trust to the new. They started out on this journey because their hopes had been dashed – but in fact their hopes had been realized, just not on their terms, not in the way they expected.

This is an experience of breaking open or breaking through, just when it was looking like a breaking down. This is like the cocoon breaking open to release the butterfly, or the egg breaking open to release the chick, or the tight flower bud breaking open to reveal the beauty of the full bloom. This is the bursting out of life from the tomb. It is the journey of the Paschal Mystery – towards life by way of dying. Resurrection comes, new life emerges – but **AT THE RIGHT TIME**. It cannot be rushed or forced. It is the deep work of God in us. It is not work for us to do, but we give ourselves to the work of waiting for the Spirit to bring new birth from deep within us.

The two pilgrims are overwhelmed by what has happened to them – new insight and understanding, new hope and courage, and a face to face encounter with the Risen One. This story has to be shared.

They arrive back in Jerusalem in the evening and find their friends and they described their experience and here we have to go a bit further on from this reading – the rest of the story is essential for our purposes today (vv 33-35). Unexpectedly, Christ turns up when they are sharing their stories about what has happened. He insists in proving his full bodily existence.

I am surprised about two things that do not happen when Jesus appears. We might have expected him to tell them how disappointed he was with them and their recent behavior. They had let him down, they had let one another down, they just did not grasp the meaning of what was happening. If it were up to us we would probably have looked at sacking the lot of them and starting out with a new group. They had had their chance and failed. But no, Jesus speaks a word of peace into their sense of failure. They are forgiven and commissioned to go and tell their stories far and wide. *Peace be with you.*

The other thing we might have expected, again based on our human inclinations, would be a call to arms. This Roman occupation force has gone too far now – even putting the Son of God to death. So, take up arms and we will fight them and drive them out of the country. But no, Jesus is very clear that responding to violence with more violence is never the way. Again, he speaks the word of peace into their inclinations for revenge – peacemaking and forgiveness mark the kingdom of God, never violence. *Peace be with you.*

This is so helpful for us today as we figure out what to do as the Body of Christ in this place. They were given the space to tell their stories without judgment or criticism. They asked for and received forgiveness from one another so that hurts were laid to rest. They were given a word of peace and commanded to BE PEACE for each other and the whole world. Christ helps them see this as the whole message of his life and ministry and the whole purpose of these recent events. What the scriptures had foretold was not simply that the Messiah was to suffer and to rise from the dead, but also that '*repentance for the forgiveness of sins*' should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem' (v 47). Of this the disciples are to be witnesses. Now we see that God's dream, plan, is to bring peace to each person, to each relationship, to each nation and this is to be possible by way of forgiveness. Just as the Spirit has empowered Jesus from the beginning of his mission, so the witnesses must remain in Jerusalem until they are similarly clothed with power from on high.

That's it – it's as simple as that. But as we consider our journey here we have to admit we haven't really given this our best effort. As we look at the journey of the wider church the same might be said.

Today, like the disciples in the story, we have to put a great deal together. As we do that in faith and hope and love, the Spirit of Christ will transform us and lead us into the new life which is God's deepest desire and gift for us.

The disciples at the end of the story are a very different group from the way they were at the beginning.

They wanted to understand, to make sense of it all – it turned out to blow their minds.

They wanted to be in control – it turned out to be far more than they expected.

They wanted to stay in their narrow and confined ways – it turned out they found themselves in a wide and spacious place.

May that be so for all the disciples of this community as well.