

The walk to Emmaus. 30 April 2017.

Before I speak about the resurrection-experience of the apostles I would like to share two stories. One is personal and true, the other made up to convey a limited truth. Some years ago I went on a visit to Taizé and spent a long day there, meeting people and taking part in discussions. The whole experience ended with a church service, of which I remember neither the readings nor even the chants - both of which were memorable in their way - but the frequent silences. These made an impression, still unforgettable, of something - experienced as a feeling of pressure - which demanded to be attended to and understood. I think of it as 'the Taizé silence'. The other is a once popular sermon illustration: Jesus welcomed home by the Heavenly Father is asked how his earthly ministry will be carried on. His answer is that he left twelve men to finish the task. "It's up to them now." Colin Morris in his book *'Mankind my Church'* appreciates the point is effective but seems to suggest that God's resources are meagre! Did Jesus really have no 'Plan B'?

As we read the Gospel accounts of the events following on the death of Jesus, it all seems to be crowded into a few action-packed days, as the Christian church and its theology emerge. The dramatic story is told circumstantially, moving from fear and despair, through doubt, to renewed confidence and faith. We are presented with a journey, from one view of life and the world to another, which in hindsight appears as a transition from one historical epoch to another.

Those who have examined the texts with care tell us that the various narratives tell different stories; that they are not eye-witness accounts, but are based on a version first told in Mark's Gospel; that they are influenced in the telling by a study of the Hebrew Scriptures. They are more concerned with theology, in the form of claims made for Jesus, than with historical accuracy. All this is not to deny that the stories as we have them have a basis in fact, but it leaves us to recognise that those facts we would wish to know for certain are few, and much has been lost or confused. The challenge is to read over the shoulder of each evangelist, and to consider what the text is silent about as well as what it does say.

Fortunately, much has been researched and written about the background of the times, giving a picture of daily life among many kinds of people in the Greco-Roman world. From our modern standpoint we are likely to wonder about the facts of the case (what exactly happened), or the psychology of the people concerned; none of which are available. In fact we are confronted with what happened to a group: we are watching it become a new version of community, for which we use the Greek word *koinônia*. We may know it as the church, but we also glimpse the way of life which Jesus called the kingdom of God, where the divine power operates in the world.

It is a story about community, but we could read it as about a handful of individuals, some named and some nameless: the twelve and their adherents. If we attend to the witness of the apostle Paul, in 1Corinthians, we may also glimpse the Plan B which, following the Crucifixion, laid the foundation for what followed.

Paul's mission results from his "seeing Jesus our Lord" (9:1). Whatever was involved in 'seeing' Jesus after his death, it was a widespread experience in number and location. As well as Peter and the twelve, he mentions James 'and all the apostles' while between these references come the words "Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters"! (15: 5-7). The same Paul recalls visiting a community of baptised believers who had not heard of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 19: 1-2: "Paul ... came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit'. He asked, 'Into what then were you baptised?' And they answered, 'Into John's baptism'." They had received the baptism of John. We hear little of what became of those crowds that John baptised in the Jordan, but this suggests they survived as a community, probably a number of such.

Surely those who were healed, accepted and restored to their communities during the successful Galilean ministry of Jesus did not forget the one who had changed their lives? We may guess that their testimony continued and led to the community of faith and witness that Paul at first opposed and then saw as the ongoing life of Christ. John Dominic Crossan puts it thus: the story of the road to Emmaus embodies decades of faith experience and practice by anonymous believers. Our task today, as their successors, is no different: we too need to tell our story, based on our various experience of 'seeing Jesus'.

What we see will be of our time, reflecting those values we hold dear, but the risen Jesus will also appear to future generations, in response to their different needs: in Schweitzer's words, "as one unknown". We meet today as a result of those earlier experiences, and our witness is a link in the ongoing life of Christ among his people.

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