

Sunday 26th April

Luke 24: 13 – 35

Clive James, who died last November, wrote a significant number of poems in his last few years of life. He knew that he did not have long to live and realised that as he slowed down his awareness of the things around him heightened. He noticed more about life. I have reflected on this in the past to ordination candidates as I have spoken about the need for those of us in ministry to notice the little things, the seemingly inconsequential things, the things which get easily overlooked. One of my favourite poems by Clive is called Saying Yes to Life, in which he observes:

My daughter's garden has a goldfish pool
With six fish each a finger long.
I stand and watch them following their rule
Of never touching, never going wrong:
Trajectories perfect as plain song.

Once, I would not have noticed; nor have known
The name for Japanese anemones,
So frail, so frail. But now I catch the tone
Of leaves. No birds can touch down in the trees
Without my seeing them. I count the bees.



I don't know about you, but because my own world has got smaller over the last five or six weeks, I too have begun to notice the small things. I had not realised, until someone told me on Facebook recently, that I had cowslips in the garden, a wild flower, which I now understand is becoming rarer when in normal time I do not venture out into the garden to notice what is growing. I have also taken significant notice of birdsong so that I now can recognise unusual birdsong when it happens, when in normal time I rarely take time to stop and listen. I have enjoyed the food that I have eaten in a new way as it refreshingly breaks up the day with its variety and flavours when usually I tuck into whatever is there thinking of what I need to move on to next.

So much of life is lived on the hoof that forced lockdown has meant having to take it at a more leisurely pace, and to enjoy the delights which God places in front of us just where we are. We are also having to pay attention more to how we present worship through live streaming, or how we speak to one another on the telephone. Somehow, we are paying attention in new ways, like Clive James did within his own garden.

Our Gospel passage for this week, that well known walk to Emmaus, also reveals to us something about the intentionality of God's relationship with us, and how noticing something afresh can have a life changing effect on how we view Christ's presence in the world and our own faith response.

The perplexities of the post-resurrection events we saw in last week's gospel passage, as Jesus appeared to his disciples, challenging Thomas' faith in needing to see before he believed. That perplexity continues this week with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. We come to this passage as people who already know that Jesus is risen. For us there is no secret about the resurrection to be disclosed to them. Instead, what they discover is a story of how disbelief is

dispelled, how two deeply involved disciples are able to move beyond the tradition about Jesus to an experience of personal recognition.

This journey engaged their senses in a very real way. Firstly, we hear at the beginning of this account in Luke's gospel that the two disciples were talking to one another as they walked along. I wonder what they were saying. Trying to make sense of it all? trying to remember what Jesus had taught them? Then as the journey continues, Jesus joins them, asking them questions. He was concerned and as he heard their description of the week's events, he explained to them the scripture about the longed-for Messiah.

Thinking about those disciples reminds me of the questions we often ask about life, and are probably now asking about life and about God – How? Why? When? We can often work out some of the answers for ourselves, but often need each other to help us. Sharing fears and doubts is natural and the role of the church at such a time as this is to be a channel for those questions so that together we can draw closer to Christ as we talk about the work of God in our world.

The disciples listened. Not only did Jesus listen to the disciples at the time when they were most downcast, but they listened to him. When he gave thanks, they heard familiar words. Jesus interprets the Jewish scriptures. Though they can recount the story of the empty tomb from the women and from the disciples who confirm the women's statement, this is not enough. The tradition must be viewed through the lens of scripture. In Jesus' death and resurrection, the long story of God's purpose for Israel finds its culmination.

And what emerges in the story is a paradoxical relationship between the risen Jesus and the scriptures. On the one hand it takes the risen Jesus to explain the meaning of the text. Only in light of Easter does the divine story make sense. On the other hand, an understanding of the scriptures is critical to recognising who Jesus is and to grasping the importance of what he has done.

When Jesus gave thanks over the meal later in the day, the disciples were able to recognise him. They said to one another 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?' Jesus' words spoke truth to them, reassuring them that all had not been in vain.

Jesus is always willing to listen to us and we need also be ready to listen to him. Times of stopping, of stillness and silence are very important in our busy lives and it has been interesting to listen, as I have done this week, to those who are using this time to slow down and reassess the busyness, and also to listen to what God might be saying about the future. There is a story about a parishioner entering the office of their vicar finding her pacing backwards and forwards, her hands clasped behind her back. 'What's the problem?' asked the parishioner, to which the vicar replied, 'The problem is that I am in a hurry, but God isn't!'

How often are we like that? Listening takes time, needs our attention. How are we listening right now?

Mouths, ears, and eyes. The disciples' journey involved their seeing. Early in the passage we learn that the two failed to perceive that it is Jesus who comes to walk with them because 'their eyes were kept from recognising him.' God apparently had temporarily blinded them. Towards the end of the account we read that 'their eyes were opened, and they recognised him.'

Jesus breaks bread with the two companions. The language of the passage recalls the account of the feeding of the multitudes and the last supper with the disciples making the connection to the Lord's supper inescapable. The experience of eating precipitates recognition as 'their eyes were opened' and 'he had made known to them'.

Very often we too cannot see the risen Christ, although he is walking with us, unless he wills to disclose himself. Recognition for the disciples does not come automatically nor is it the end product of a particular search instead it is a gift of God, a self-revelation by which God honours promises made long long ago. Christ met the disciples where they were, shared their feelings and then gradually began to reveal himself to them.

For many of us our eyes have been opened at some time in our lives. Somewhere on our journey through life we have met Christ and come to believe in him. It is often when we begin to look backwards that we can begin to see God at work at particular times in our life. I wonder what we are seeing now. For many of us it will be beautiful things in the midst of a time of pain and death. Just like Clive James experienced through coming to terms with his own mortality. It is sad that corporately at this time we are unable to come together through Holy Communion, to 'taste and see that the Lord is good.' And it is perhaps poignant to be reminded here that our sustenance is to be gained by looking back and enjoying what God has provided in the past and with an expectation of the future promises of feasting.

The Emmaus story relates what happens in moving from blindness to sight, from disbelief to confession of faith, from sadness to delight. From that time onwards the disciples had purpose for their journey. As soon as their eyes had been opened, they were fixed again on Jerusalem as they returned there with news for the next part of their faith journey.

The concluding scene at Jerusalem from St Luke's gospel pictures a gathering of the Eleven and their friends and the two who had rushed back from Emmaus each confessing the risen Jesus and relating their experiences of recognition. The church is composed of those who have been led beyond disbelief to faith by the gracious revelation of God. Their repeated telling of and listening to the foundational story empowers them in anticipation of their mission to all the nations, a mission which begins where we leave them in Jerusalem.

I wonder where you will go once lockdown is over. Will it be to loved ones, or will it be to a favourite spot, a coastal walk, or to the local church? Whatever it will be, we will not only find Christ there, but he will be going with us because he stands along side us now, hearing our questions, speaking his reassurance through scripture, wanting to open our eyes and enjoying our worship and service in response.

In our lockdown the same risen Christ is here with us if we take time to notice him, giving some meaning to our slowing down, our ponderings and new rhythms, and preparing us when the time comes to go out once again to all nations. That is what it means to be Easter people and our own recognition of Christ is our message to the world that Jesus is indeed alive and we can all have hope in him.