

Sermon Archive 149

Sunday 30 April, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Luke 24: 13-35

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



How's this for an image of humanity?

Humanity is a couple of friends walking along a road – talking out loud to each other about the things they've just experienced. The human being is a talking creature – one that seeks engagement with others, so it can sort out its thinking and feeling – make sense of things. The psychologists call it “meaning-making” – engaging in either internal or shared conversations through which we retain, reaffirm, revise or replace elements of our thinking to develop a more nuanced, complex understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. We talk things through – to work them out. The friends may think they're walking to Emmaus – but in fact they're talking their way to meaning.

One of the things they've had to talk themselves through is the way that violence has erupted into their life. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, people with lanterns, torches and weapons had turned up – demanding that they give up their friend. No, no; we were in the business of spreading love and loving peace! Where did this violence come from? Like a dairy owner nursing a shattered arm after a robbery, like a man in Southland hospital with a gunshot wound and a gaping bereavement, they find themselves wondering why their story has so suddenly turned cruel. The world had been ordinary. The world had made trivial sense – in the main. Now we're having to talk through the capturing and killing of Jesus, the slaying of our friend. It's not easy to make meaning of that. So the human beings talk to each other. (Why do we do these things to one another? Why do we allow these things to happen? Why can't we live in peace? What on earth is wrong with us?) Walking their way to Emmaus, but talking their way to meaning.

Another thing they need to make sense of is this: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”. **Had** hoped. Past tense, no longer hoping. When you hope, something comes to life within you. There’s a skip of the spirit, a gentle rising in the soul. And you begin to see possibilities in your world – ever more real and interesting with every stirring of hope. I could do **this** with my life. Together, we might be able to achieve **that**. Is this excitement? Is this growth? Is the future a flower beautifully opening? No; we **had** hoped, but we were wrong. We can see now that we were wrong. And so the sensible thing just now is to go back home – forget about what “might have been”, and deal plainly with what “is”.

Finding meaning in disappointment. Friedrich Nietzsche said “embrace the disappointment – hold it to your heart!” Don’t put lipstick on it – trying to make it nicer than it really is. Stare at it closely in all its unmodified plainness. Don’t drink alcohol to blot it out. Don’t go to church for comforting angels. The God whose gift is hope - has died. Life has no higher purpose or meaning – get over it!

Not quite ready just to get over it, two friends are talking about how they used to hope. It’s part of all they’re talking about. Dealing with disappointment. Walking their way to Emmaus, talking their way to meaning . . .

Also in the conversation is that stuff about what the women believe. The women have made some faith statements that, quite honestly, “astound” us. We could have said “surprise” us, or “make us wonder”. We say, though, that **we are astounded**. It’s a word with connotations of disbelief. People who are astounded are not quite on board yet. They’re still at the stage of saying “I can’t believe it!” The women may believe it, the angels may proclaim it, but we’re not quite there yet. It’s too much of a challenge simply to say “My Lord and my God, I believe”. So part of the conversation along the road is about things that **other people** believe – when **I myself** can’t yet say “Amen.” Some people believe that good will always win the day. I’d like to believe it, but for now I can’t say “Amen”. Some people believe that love is stronger than hate. I’d like to believe it, but for now I can’t say “Amen”. Some people believe that Jesus is alive and appearing to his people. I would like to believe it . . . so it’s becoming

part of what I talk to my travelling companions about. Exploring other people's beliefs as I go seeking for meaning. Along the way I'm going to come across all sorts of beliefs – and some of them will astound me – not in a good way. I'll find people believing that guns are the way to peace. I'll find people believing that same-sex lovers are bound for hell. I'll find people believing that poor people are somehow less than human. I'll find people believing that it is better that one man should die for the people. I will be astounded – and **should be astounded** by some of the things that people claim to believe. I will need some way of working through the Sea of beliefs – without drowning. So I'm talking it through with my companion – sharing the experience, testing the conversation, as we think about what we've seen around Jesus. Walking our way to Emmaus, talking our way to meaning.

That's a picture of humanity: a couple of friends walking along a road – talking out loud to one another about the things they've just experienced. The human being is a talking creature – seeking engagement with others, so it can sort out its thinking and feeling – make sense of things and its place among it all. That's humanity.

There's another figure on the Emmaus road. It looks like humanity as well, but maybe there's more to it than that. He comes up alongside the friends and says "what are you talking about? What's been happening?" It's a lovely open question – perfectly composed for creatures who need to talk their way to meaning. The "what's been happening" third person is the perfect complement for self-reflective travellers. It's as if they were **made** for each other. At his asking, all the words and thoughts just spill out onto the road. Their shock at the violence of their world. Their processing of the failure of their hopes. Their wondering at the amazing beliefs of others – which they themselves would love also to believe. It all comes out. He's perfect company for creatures who need to talk.

Then it's his turn to talk. He speaks of the same experiences that they have had – for he has been there too. But he speaks of it all from a longer perspective – within a frame you might call "God's longer view".

The view includes the whole story of God taking care of people. The view includes Moses and the prophets - and the ancestors unto whom eternal pledges were made. The view includes the sad sayings of the carpenter about the inevitability of the suffering of the servant. The view includes the cherished Son entering into glory. Into their making of meaning, he speaks of eternal Easter things. These were things the travellers had forgotten – or maybe never heard. But *as* he speaks them, we read, within the hearts of his hearers something begins to burn. Is it something like the hope they used to have? Is it excitement? Is it belief?

The Emmaus companion enables us to reflect more deeply on what has happened to us, from the perspective of God's longer view. The result is the stirring of faith; our eyes are opened. We see that Christ is alive, and speaking to his people. Then suddenly he's gone – turning this encounter into something for the talk that needs to continue with others. Emmaus travellers get straight back on the road. There are people back in Jerusalem with whom they need to talk.

From now on, we walk and talk our way to meaning, under the claim that God shares in our experience, and that God, like us, wonders about the nature of our world. From now on, we walk and talk our way to meaning under the claim that violence, and the failure of hope, and the belief-bending astonishment of Easter, are no impediments to our journeying with God - but are in fact part of how God opens to us the story. From now on we walk and talk our way to meaning nurturing the company of the One who shares with us the blessing of God's longer view.

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How's this for an image of humanity? A couple of friends walking along a road – talking out loud to each other about the things they've just experienced. Walking alongside them, another figure – looking like humanity, but to the opened eye, something rather more. We'll talk about this some more . . . because that's what we do on our road to meaning. But for now, a moment of quiet.

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