

The Story of the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus is a quintessential Easter story. It is about the Risen Lord, about how one comes to recognise him, and about what happens as consequence of this recognition. In telling this story, Luke paints a portrait not just of the Risen Lord, but also a portrait of the Church. He says: this is how Jesus really is, this is how the Church really is, this is how people of faith (aka disciples) meet the Risen Lord and receive new life. Put it in another way, this is what faith and salvation look like for Luke.

At the heart of the Emmaus Story lies the value of what the disciples come to see for themselves. To enter this story, today's reader(s) must do the same: we must ourselves begin to read and hear this story.

## Beginning to Read the Story

There are a few very interesting features in this story; to dismiss them is, in effect, to dismiss Luke and his inspired word. Beginning to read this story demands that we attend to it *as it unfolds*. The following observations might help you in that process

- the disciples see Jesus but they don't recognise him – they see him but can't see him;
- this failure to recognise is not their own 'fault' – their eyes are 'kept from recognising him (24:16). The disciples' blindness is more than the disciples' blindness;
- they engage with the 'stranger' who addresses them. They do not dismiss this apparently clueless person. This engagement reaches its highpoint when they invite him to remain on and eat with them;
- they give the 'stranger' a comparatively full account of who Jesus *had been* for them – it is an account of Jesus in the past;
- the 'stranger' re-reads the Scriptures for them; this is precisely what Jesus had done at the beginning of Gospel: in the desert with the devil (4:1-13) and in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (4:16-20);
- the disciples' hearts are opened to the 'stranger' – they offer him hospitality; this is the pivot of the story – offering



hospitality brings them into the place where their eyes are opened (again, not their own doing!);

- they realise how their hearts *burned* within them as he read the Scriptures to them; at the beginning, John had told the crowd that he baptised with water, but one was coming ... who would 'baptise ... with the Holy Spirit and fire.' (3:16)
- the energy and revitalisation they receive is rooted in what has happened to them; they move from secondhand reports to their own words;
- it is only afterwards that the two disciples recognise who has been with them and indeed what was happening to them: there is an essential looking back.

## Hearing What We Read

For decades now, we have recognised the essential narrative character of the Gospels. That said, our day-to-day interpretation of the Gospels remains at another level: we still read them seeking an immediate formula of faith. The Gospels, however, only give the fullness of their life to those who – like the two disciples – travel with them, and somehow become engaged enough to invite them in. So what might one hear in this story? Let us read this in the key of the parish.

**A Parish for Luke is people who move.** Travelling is a core Lukan motif.<sup>1</sup> The disciples are walking (*peripatountes*). It is on the road that one meets the Hidden and Risen Lord. It is on the road that one hears him. It is on the road and in mystery that these and all disciples are transformed.<sup>2</sup>

**A Parish for Luke is people to whom Jesus draws near.** It is Jesus who draws

near (*engikisas*) the disciples not the disciples who come to Jesus! Luke, in contrast to Matthew and Mark does not have the Kingdom draw near; it is the Risen Lord who draws near. This happens in God's time and not in ours.

**A Parish for Luke is people who talk to Jesus.** The disciples tell Jesus their disappointments and dashed hopes.

**A Parish for Luke is people who practice hospitality.** It is the disciples' genuine hospitality that is pivotal in this story. From their openness to

the stranger – a key precept of the Law – flow a twofold recognition: first of him (24:31), and second of what had been happening in themselves. Their hospitality (like that of Martha and Zacchaeus, and unlike that of Simon the Pharisee) is real.

## Living What we Hear

This is part of how Luke sees what happened to the disciples and what happens to disciples. Without a sense of loss, there can be no encounter with the Risen Lord. Without talking to the stranger, there will be no encounter with the Risen Lord! Without reading the Scriptures with him, there will be no new insight or revelation. Without offering bread to the stranger, there will be no space to recognise. Without recognition, there will be no energy.

I wonder what the Irish Church would be like were we honestly to name our loss and tell others what our hopes had been. What would happen were we to listen to him read the Scriptures to us has we journeyed along? What would happen if our parishes offered bread to strangers? Would HE be revealed to us in that talking and giving?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Bible one finds recurring literary features which the sacred authors use to communicate key dimensions of their narratives. These recurring literary features are called motifs. In the Gospel of Mark, secrecy is one such motif. In Luke's journey (way, to travel, to go), returning/turning back are core motifs.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier in the Gospel, the 10 lepers were healed while *on their way* to the priests (17:14).