We come this morning to one of the most beautiful stories in the New Testament: the transformation that takes place as two people move from being downcast and depressed to being filled with the sort of joy and enthusiasm they thought they’d lost forever.

It’s late afternoon, just outside the city of Jerusalem. Two of the followers of Jesus are on their way home to Emmaus, a village about seven miles away. Cleopas and an unnamed companion, perhaps his wife, are talking about what has happened. Just like people who’ve had a traumatic experience, they go over it again and again, scarcely able to believe the awful things that have been happening. As they continue on their way, Jesus joins them and walks along with them. Except that they don’t realise it’s him. At this point, verse 16, ‘their eyes were holden that they should not know him’ ['their eyes were kept from recognizing him'].

This is one of the reasons why this story is so helpful for us. Jesus is present with them almost from the very beginning of this story, though they do not see it. As far as they are concerned, Jesus is dead and buried. They do not expect to see him ever again. For them, he is all in the past.

The idea is that we can put ourselves in their place. And know that, just as Jesus was with them though they did not realize it, so too he is with us even if we do not realize it, even if we do not sense or feel his presence. He is not far from all who are genuinely seeking him. As with these two, he may have things to teach us and need to conceal himself for a while. But the fact that we do not recognize his presence does not mean that he has abandoned us.

This stranger asks an innocent question: ‘What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad’ ['What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?'] (verse 17). Their response is to stop, to stand still, ‘looking sad’. Cleopas is amazed. Verse 18: ‘Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days’ ['Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?']

Jesus invites him to go on. Just as he invites us to share with him the reality of what’s on our hearts. The great thing about him is that we can’t hide anything from him and so we don’t have to hold anything back. He can cope with anything, no matter how depressing or embarrassing or horrifying. And so Cleopas tells him about their desperate disappointment. His sense of let-down and profound anti-climax. Here is someone whose hopes have been totally shattered. Someone whose faith in God has been shaken to its foundations. Someone whose expectations that God was really doing something significant have been dashed.

Does this describe us? Maybe we were expecting God to step in and stop something from happening. But he didn’t. Maybe we can’t understand why he doesn’t intervene and do something about a situation which is really important to us. But he hasn’t. There’s something for here for any of us who have faced or who now face a dilemma like this. Where is God? Why doesn’t he do something?

Notice that Cleopas knows the facts about Jesus. We have here what one commentator describes as the ‘Gospel according to Cleopas’. ‘Jesus the prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people’ (verse 19). His hope that Jesus was ‘the one which should have redeemed Israel’ ['to redeem Israel'] (verse 21). His great disappointment that the ‘chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him’ ['chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him'] (verse 20). The confusion they feel at the clearly unexpected rumours that Jesus’ body had disappeared from the tomb.
He has almost everything, doesn’t he? All the pieces of the jigsaw are there. He has all the facts. But he lacks what links them all together. The certainty that everything has fallen into place and that Jesus is alive and active now. A personal experience of the Jesus he has come to know and love. His own encounter with his living Lord.

My guess is that there are people today who are rather like Cleopas and his companion. They have the facts about Jesus at their fingertips. But they haven’t quite put them together and arrived at the reality of a Jesus who is alive and present with us now. Not simply a great man from the past but also the living Lord of today and tomorrow. Not just someone we know about. But someone we know. That’s what Jesus is going to give Cleopas and his companion. That’s what I believe we can ask him to give us too. The gift of knowing him personally.

But he begins with a word of rebuke. They wouldn’t be in the turmoil they’re in had they paid closer attention to the teaching of the Bible. The Bible provides the key to the otherwise confusing sequence of events that Cleopas has so eloquently described. How good it is to acknowledge this as we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible, revealing the word of God to his people in the English-speaking world since 1611. The Bible reveals that the horror of the crucifixion, far from denying that Jesus was the expected Messiah, shows that this is exactly who he was. That a crucified Messiah is the only sort of Messiah there is! Had they paid more attention to the Scriptures they would have been able to make more sense of what was going on.

In any situation, we have two choices. To look at it from the point of view of our limited human understanding. Or to have our minds opened up so that we see it from God’s perspective. There can often be a difference. There certainly is here. Cleopas has in mind a Jesus whose promising career was tragically cut short by his early death. But as the Bible shows and the events of Easter Day confirm, God has in mind a Jesus whose death would be the gateway to his greatest achievement!

So how about us? If appearances were deceptive then, might they not be deceptive now? Isn’t this what trusting God is all about. Hanging onto the conviction that God know what he’s doing even when what has happened screams out that he doesn’t.

This is one of the reasons why regular reading of the Bible is so important for us. It helps us to overcome the pollution of ignorance and unbelief by making clear how God sees things. That’s why we need to read, study, seek to understand and ask the Holy Spirit to unfold the Bible to us. So that, like these two disciples, our minds are opened and our hearts burn within us.

As they approach Emmaus, Jesus appears to be going on further. Verse 29: ‘But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them.’ [‘But they urged him strongly, saying, ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them.’]

Here then is the moment of recognition. Verses 30-31: ‘And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.’ [‘When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.’]

It was brief but enough. Although, of course, this was for them just a simple bite of supper, there are clear echoes of another meal in the way Luke tells the story. Christians down the centuries have often testified to the way in which Holy Communion is an opportunity to reflect on and draw near to the Jesus who makes himself known through the breaking of the bread.

The result is that they immediately return to Jerusalem to share the good news that, yes, Jesus really is alive. He has made himself known even to us!

So - what do we learn from these two followers of Jesus about experiencing the reality of his presence?

First, the value of companionship. Jesus drew near to them while they were talking about him ‘together’. Yes, he is present with us as individuals. But he is especially present, he reveals himself more fully, as we meet together. If God feels distant, keeping our distance from other believers will hinder rather than help.
Secondly, the value of the Bible. How much grief they could have saved themselves if they had paid more attention to what the Scriptures had to say and so had a better idea of what God was up to.

Thirdly, the value of Holy Communion. As we approach the Lord’s table, Luke’s story encourages us to expect that we will encounter afresh the love of Jesus expressed in the bread and the wine, symbols of his broken body and poured-out blood. These two disciples recognized Jesus as he broke the bread and gave it to them.

May the Lord Jesus enable each one of us not just to know about him. But to know him for ourselves and share with others the truly good news that he is alive. Amen.

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