

I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS



Forum 2018

'I am with you always'
– together in God's mission –

Multi-voice Bible Study

Luke 24: 13-35 (Emmaus)

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The Emmaus Story: Walking Together on the Way – Learning to Be the Church

I think that this title of the ARCIC III agreed statement sums up both what we see happening in the Emmaus story and our own task: that of learning to be the church, using the various means that the evangelist explores in the course of the narrative.

The Emmaus story has its own particular place in Luke's carefully presented version of the gospel. The evangelist uses it to bridge the gap between the absence of Jesus' body at the tomb (24:1-12; v 23) and the full presence, complete with a demonstration of wounds, provided when Jesus appears to the eleven and others back in Jerusalem.

Luke characterizes all three scenes, at the tomb, on the journey, and with the gathered group, as having a kind of 'divine necessity', for which he uses the Greek verb beloved of the evangelists (**42x, including Acts** (8, 6, 18+21, 10), compared with 38 in the whole of the rest of the New Testament), *dei*, 'it is necessary':

- first, at the tomb, the angels remind the women of Jesus' saying that the son of man 'must' be handed over (24:7),
- then, Jesus tells our two disciples that 'it was necessary' that the Christ should suffer (v 26),
- and later he reminds those gathered in Jerusalem that he had told them previously that everything the Scriptures said about him 'must' be fulfilled (v 44).

This is *God's* necessity, so it's not surprising that mere mortals have a hard time understanding it. We're all still working on it.

In the next few minutes, with this idea of God's necessity as background, I'd like to draw attention to three interrelated aspects of the Emmaus story, each about a real but mysterious way in which the risen Jesus is present to the community, both then and now.

As the curtain rises, Kleopas and his companion are talking to each other, trying to figure out the meaning of some very strange and unsettling events. That they are struggling with this is all to their credit. Disinclined, for whatever reason, to believe the stories about what happened at the tomb (women seeing visions of angels?!), Kleopas ends his account of it with an emphatic 'him [Jesus] they did not see' (v 24), presumably raising his downcast face to look at the stranger as he finishes what he has to say. It's a question of knowing what you're looking for and at: we don't always see what is before our eyes.

I wonder whether part of the trouble with these two is that their recent experience has been too much the same for both of them, so that in their discussion they kept going over the same ground and found themselves unable to break out of their depression and confusion because events had not turned out as they had expected: "We had hoped..." (v 21) surely the saddest of phrases.

Then there is their question to Jesus: "You don't *know* about this?" We all tend to assume that our understanding of events is fairly complete and normative, but the viewpoint and experience of each person and even of each group is very restricted indeed, as we keep on learning from engagement in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, not to mention our experiences within our own ecclesial communities.

So the first of the three circumstances in which the church came to locate the presence of the apparently absent Jesus is when an anonymous stranger turns up and joins in a conversation about himself.

Then as now, he is not easy to recognize, perhaps because, like the disciples, we are not really able to get our heads round the astounding idea that Luke is foregrounding here: that the now-living Christ (24:5) is the crucified one. In God's necessity, the execution of Jesus was not the disaster that Kleopas and his friend thought it was but somehow the pre-condition for Jesus' being with the community that gathers to see how they can come to understand him better. He turns up as they—we—walk along ("walking" is a Hebrew idiom for living) and talk about him, but we don't always catch on: our eyes are 'kept from recognizing him'.

The resource that the two pilgrims need to make sense of their experience is, of course, Scripture, our Old Testament, but only if it is understood in light of the community's experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Reading Scripture from within their traditional framework (or indeed from anyone else's, including a purely academic one) would not have revealed anything to them. In particular, you can't deduce a suffering Messiah from the Old Testament, much less a crucified one. It's simply not there.

Admittedly, Isaiah writes about the suffering Servant of the Lord who justifies many, bearing the sins of others, and the early community made great use of this section of Isaiah, particularly 52:13—53:12, but there is nothing in this passage to connect to the **Messiah** that some of Jesus' contemporaries were expecting, a Messiah who was to conquer by the usual coercive measures, and Old Testament passages that are clearly messianic do not require that the key figure should suffer.

On the other hand, once Scripture has been understood to provide the interpreting framework for the central mystery of God's action in Christ, it becomes a storehouse for the resources that the early church needed to develop the fuller and always evolving understanding of the person and work of Jesus and his significance for Christian living. That's how we got the New Testament, as thoughtful followers of Jesus gradually worked backwards from talking about his death and resurrection, to his ministry, his conception and birth, and right back to the Johannine prologue and the insights found in the Letter to the Hebrews.

So in the Emmaus story we see a key feature of how all Scripture, but, here, particularly the Old Testament, functions for Christians: it is not a proof text but is revelatory when read in light of people's [Spirit-guided] experience of God's mysterious plan—that divine necessity that took the form of the death and resurrection of Jesus. 'Was it not **necessary** that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?' (v 26); the Son of man **must** be crucified (v 7), Jesus had said when in Galilee; and he will insist to the larger group later on that Easter day that the **necessary fulfilment** of what was written about him in the Scriptures (v 44) is that 'the Messiah is to suffer...' (v 46). The retrospectively-recognized 'burning' of the two disciples' heart indicates that this teaching of Jesus reached them at a level deeper than anything they could recognize at the time, far less articulate. Similarly, our concrete, day-to-day, Spirit-guided experience of what God has done in Christ is what is needed to make the Bible revelatory for us—to make him present to us. It's not 'Bible study', though that may be a lead up to it. Rather, it's a dynamic, mutually interpreting process, a dialectic that involves much effort on the part of readers, who never know where it will lead them.

The pair of disciples is finally able to put it all together when, at the table to which they have invited him, Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. But of course the opening of their eyes and recognition of him is immediately followed by his absence. As at the tomb, 'he is not here' (v 5).

But at Emmaus his 'absence' has a very different quality and effect, for two reasons: first, because the two disciples now have a sense of why Jesus and his ministry mattered and, secondly, they have a community context in which to continue their lives. Instead of miserably wandering off to get away from it all, they are energized (the text says they 'raise themselves up', the '*anastasis*' verb, v 33) to return to the rest of the group with their news.

Luke's story continues with the final and definitive appearance of Jesus to this bigger group who are talking about him, much as the Emmaus pair had done earlier although with more to go on. I'd like to suggest, though, that our state is most like that of the two when they were on their way back to Jerusalem. They now know that death-and-resurrection is the key to being part of God's plan and that Scripture and the breaking of the bread supply the resources they will need for the next part of their journey in which Jesus is apparently not with them but in fact is, in some strange way, **more** present to them than before, because of the way that God has set things up. Perhaps the presence of Jesus in the church is a bit like an iceberg with three peaks—most of what matters is below the surface, but we can articulate that depth as Luke did in his story, in terms of **the presence of Jesus in the community, in God's word, and in the breaking of the bread** in whatever form our part of the Church celebrates it together. It takes Matthew 28 chapters to convey that Jesus is indeed with the church; Luke does it in one story.

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Given on 19 September 2018 at CTE's Forum

For the video, click the link on www.cte.org.uk/Forum2018/afterwards