

Christ Church, Bath
[online]

Holy Eucharist

Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday 26 April 2020

St Luke 24.13-35

Preacher: Canon Simon Tatton-Brown

The two disciples were intrigued. Who was this stranger who joined them on the road to Emmaus? St Luke tells us that “their eyes were kept from recognising him” which is one theory. My guess is that St Luke wants his readers to be as baffled as they were, because (if it’s the same person) Cleopas was Jesus’ uncle by marriage. You’d have thought he would have recognised his own nephew!

But perhaps not. The human brain has a well understood capacity only to see what it wants, or

what it expects, and Jesus was the last person Cleopas or his companion were expecting.

Ordinary kindness (to say nothing of the conventions of hospitality) meant that the two travellers welcomed the stranger. Nor did they mind when he asked if he could join in their conversation. Were they intrigued because he seemed to know nothing about what they were discussing? They were more than happy to share their thoughts – and their disappointment. “We’d hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.” But they also shared their puzzlement over the reports they’d subsequently been hearing. As if their new friend, seemingly the only stranger in Jerusalem who did not know the things that had taken place there in these last days, would have been able to tell them anything! It was only later that evening, after he had disappeared from their sight, that they recalled how their hearts had burned within them while he was talking to them on the road.

We didn’t need the lockdown for many of us to spend so much time on the internet and social media. Following the role of Facebook in the politics of last year I’d disabled my account as I

wanted as little to do with it as I could. I've only reactivated it now so I can follow worship from Christ Church, which explains why I'm not responding to friends' requests etc. I do feel a bit guilty though. Am I cold-shouldering friends, in the way that Cleopas and his companion did not cold-shoulder the stranger in our gospel story?

Disabling Facebook hasn't protected me from some of the videos circulating during the lockdown. Last week I watched one forwarded on one of my WhatsApp groups. Telling the story of Coronavirus, beginning with the outbreak in Wuhan, it made all sorts of claims about what the Chinese government had or had not done. It left me uneasy, and I looked up the website of DigitalPhablet whose logo the video displayed. Who is responsible for the video? Where are they based? Whose agenda are they promoting? How can I be sure that what it reports is true? There was nothing on the video to tell me. There was absolutely no accountability. Needless to say I have not forwarded it on.

But what would have happened if Cleopas and his companion had adopted a similar attitude to the

stranger? And when they'd heard what he had to say, what would have happened had they not invited him to join them at the inn?

Religion, as we know, is always attended by controversy. As the old Jewish saying goes, put two rabbis together and you get three opinions. It was certainly true at the time of Jesus. Then as now the different parties were appealing to scripture, interpreting (as the stranger was doing) the things about themselves (or their party views) as they read them 'in all the scriptures'. We do the same today. Just reflect on the controversies of our own time, about marriage and divorce, about the ordination of women, about sexuality and all the rest. The appeals to scripture rarely convince anyone – on either side. At best they confirm us in our already held opinions.

The Breaking of Bread, the Eucharist, Holy Communion or whatever we want to call it, is one of the sacraments famously described in our Book of Common Prayer as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual truth'. The punchline in this morning's gospel is of course when Cleopas and his friend recognise Christ in the

breaking of the bread. Now think back to when an argument does convince us and we perhaps change our mind or move on from the position we'd previously held. How do we put it? Don't we say "Ah, I see now" or "I recognise what you're saying"? The word 're-cognise' means that you've seen it before.

Cleopas was not one of the Twelve and as far as we know (for St Luke doesn't say) neither was the other disciple in the story. But we can be pretty sure they had enjoyed a relationship with Jesus, that they'd shared bread with him – perhaps at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, perhaps in a more intimate gathering. And from what they were telling the stranger on the road they held Jesus in high regard, as we have seen.

As we know from participating in the eucharist at church, one of the things it's about is relationship. Not for nothing do we call it Holy Communion. It's our relationship with God of course, but just as important it's our relationship with each other. When teaching confirmation candidates I always told them to think of the two axes of the Cross:

vertical, our relationship with God; horizontal, joining us ‘in love and charity with our neighbour’.

What a gracious gesture Cleopas made when he invited their guest to be their host! For in Jewish families it is the head of the household who breaks the bread and blesses the food. It should come as no surprise to us then that this is when their eyes were opened, and everything that he had said to them on the road fell into place.

We don't doubt Christ's presence in our worship or his promise that where two or three are gathered (even if digitally) he is here in our midst, here with us in our separate homes this morning. But that doesn't mean we still don't have to search our way among the various claims that others make and ask us to sign up to, whether they are claims about the various disputes that still divide Christians or claims from politicians or whatever.

And as we know, it's not just a matter of weighing up those claims, not even of setting them against the scriptures or political manifestos or even written constitutions. What we all need to do is

to judge whether the outward and visible (or audible) arguments were are listening to correspond to the inward and spiritual realities that we know to be true.