

The Road not taken

When you read the writings of Luke, he frequently takes us on the road, as he does in the passage we have just heard. For Luke it would appear that journeys are really important in telling the story of Jesus.

It was a journey that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. A road was the setting for the parable of the Good Samaritan. A road led the prodigal back home to his father. Jesus 'resolutely' set his eyes toward Jerusalem in Luke 9:51 and travelled there throughout most of the gospel until in chapter 19:28, where he arrives in Jerusalem on a colt, the Palm Sunday narrative, as we know it.

The roads continued in Luke's Book of Acts where, for instance, Paul encountered the risen Jesus on his way to Damascus. There is something about travel that evokes Luke's literary and theological imagination. There is something about roads, the way roads bring us together, the way roads can pose a danger to us all, the way roads become a symbol of a faith on the move.

Let's take a closer look at the Emmaus Road story as Luke tells it:

1. Two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, a seven mile journey from Jerusalem.
2. They were talking together about the events of the last few days, talking as you often do when out walking. It is a good time to work out your thoughts and worries.
3. Then there was a strange occurrence. Luke tells us that Jesus joins them, 'but their eyes were kept from recognizing him'. The rational part of me wants to know how this worked? How could they not recognize him? Luke doesn't tell us.
4. And so the conversation ensues.
 - 'What are you talking about?' Jesus asks.
 - 'Are you the only one around here who hasn't heard?!'. It's all over the news/ it's gone viral on the internet!
 - They begin to tell the stranger the story of how they had followed this man called Jesus, how he had been arrested, tried and sentenced to death. After his death some of the women in his group went to the tomb, were shocked to see the tomb was empty. They said they saw an angel who had told them he was not dead, he was alive. But they hadn't seen him. They had hoped he was the one.
 - The stranger told them not to be so foolish and to believe what the prophets has said about the Messiah, suffering and dying.
 - Then as they approached their destination the stranger walked on 'as if he were going on', but they invited him to stay and eat.
 - It was at this point that Jesus broke with the convention of the time. He took the bread and blessed, not the hosts, but Jesus himself and it was at that point that he recognised him. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" they said.

The story is one of a journey, but it is also a bit of a metaphor for our own faith journey. Let's take a moment to see if we can position ourselves in the story and what it might say to us :

1. Perhaps you once thought you had the whole thing worked out, faith seemed so simple and straight forward, but now you are not so sure.

Be assured that Jesus is walking beside you in this journey

2. Perhaps you have been trying to make sense of the events of our time, making sense of the suffering that has happened during this terrible time. Perhaps you or your friends and family are really struggling physically, financially or emotionally.

Be assured that Jesus is walking beside you in this journey

3. Or perhaps you are fortunate enough to see through all this and recognise God's hand in everything. You have seen the risen Lord for yourself and in the breaking of bread you have seen the face of Jesus.

Be assured that Jesus is walking beside you in this journey

4. Or perhaps you never even left the city. You are just beginning to consider what this journey might mean for you.

Be assured that Jesus is walking beside you even in this journey.

Where ever you are, the important thing is that you are on that journey and that you know that Jesus is right there with you, even though he might seem hidden from you.

A word about the breaking of bread. It is clear from Luke's Gospel that Jesus liked his food. Jesus is most himself at an ordinary meal and this is infused with significance because of the people gathered around the food. Jesus is there at this table, but so also are all the sinners and tax collectors with whom Jesus shared meals. But not only that! Also at this table are the many powerful people with whom Jesus also dined. But in this story it is the moment when Jesus was revealed to the two disciples that is most significant. They had heard about the risen Christ, but now they had experienced the risen Christ .

This story is principally one of movement. It contains at least nine verbs describing movement. The two men "are going" (24:13), Jesus "came near and went with them" (24:15), they "came near" Emmaus (24:28), Jesus "walked ahead of them" (24:28), "he went in to stay with them" (24:29), "he vanished from their sight" (24:31), and "they got up and returned to Jerusalem" (24:33). Some of the verbs tell of movements made by Jesus; others tell of the two men. Either way, both Jesus and his followers are on the move. But it is not movement for its own sake. The moves being made have a purpose:

- to tell the story of Jesus, to interpret it,
- to have fellowship (communion) with Jesus and others,
- and to share it all with others.

That is what it means to be the church.

There is a poem by Robert Frost, an American poet (1874-1963). In it he talks about two roads and how he chose the 'other path', the one less worn. In the poem he describes the thought process about which road to take:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

Whenever I chance upon this poem, it reminds me so much of the choice of path I make. It would be so easy to take the simple more worn path, the one most travelled. If I try and think ahead, it would be so easy for me and for us a church to jump back on to that well-worn path, that one we know so well. But I can't help thinking that the other path, the one 'less travelled' is the exciting one, the one where new adventures lie, where God can challenge us further in. There is some merit in saying we will walk both paths, but if we choose the correct path I don't believe we will want or even need to look back. As Frost puts it:

*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

The last verse of the poem is the one that I find inspiring:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

I took the one less travelled by – and that has made all the difference! The first friends of Jesus looked back and told the amazing stories of Jesus, of his death and resurrection, but they also journeyed forwards, they took the road 'less travelled by' and they were led into new ways to tell the glorious story of Christ risen and triumphant.

As we emerge from our lockdown lives, maybe it is a good time to look ahead to new paths, individually and as a church. I feel as though we are standing at that point where 'two roads diverge' as Robert Frost described it. Let's take time to look and pray and choose the path we believe to be right for now, for the future, rather than focus on the road we have always travelled. Let's remember that when we choose the path, we do so knowing that Jesus walks with us, just as he did on the Emmaus Road.

My prayer, this Easter season is that we don't hang on to what is past, but we look at what is past as a kind of prism, to help us prepare for what is to come on the exciting journey has prepared ahead of us on the 'road less travelled'. For if we have learnt anything from the Easter story, then we should know that Christ will be there on the path, walking, talking and leading us on, just as he did to the disciples on the Emmaus Road.

Amen.

The Road Not Taken

BY ROBERT FROST

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And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
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