

6.30 Evensong – 18th April 2010
Easter 3 – year C – Memorial Service

Isaiah 53: 1-6 & 9-12
Luke 24: 13-35

I think all of us here who have taken funeral services, at one time or another will have talked about journeys.

We all know what journeys are.

We have all had to come on a journey to be here tonight.

And tonight's second reading was all about a journey, that two people took to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

And as they walked they were talking with each other about all the things that had happened on that first Easter.

Have you ever noticed that some of the saddest words in our language begin with the letter D ?

For example - disappointment, doubt, disillusionment, defeat, despair and death.

All of these are summed up in the words of Cleopas and his companion to the stranger who joined them on the Emmaus road.

They had left the dispirited and confused band of disciples with the events of Good Friday fresh in their memories.

The small band of Jesus' followers was leaderless and falling apart, with two of them already on their way home.

The reports that Christ's tomb was empty did nothing to alter their thinking.

It only confused them.

Their entire world had come apart.

The two despondent disciples summed up the situation very neatly:

We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.

Human hope is a fragile thing, and when it withers it's difficult to revive.

Hopelessness as a disease of the human spirit is desperately hard to cure.

The Emmaus Two had erected a wall of hopelessness around themselves, and they were trapped in their misery.

We had hoped ...

What they were saying was:

We don't expect it now, but once we did.

We had it, this thing called hope, but now it's gone.

I wonder if this is something that we all can identify with ?

Has something or someone ... come between our relationship with God ?

If so, listen to the Emmaus story, because the heart-breaking experience is only its beginning.

As the travellers made their weary way to Emmaus a stranger fell alongside them.

This was going to be one of the most wonderful walks in history.

We know, of course, that it was the risen Jesus, but somehow they didn't recognize him.

In fact Luke tells us:

They were kept from recognizing him.

And this was no accident.

They weren't allowed to recognize Jesus for a purpose.

It was so that they might be in the same position as ourselves, some 2,000 years later.

Like the two on the road we have to make do with other people's testimony that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Like them we don't know quite what to make of it.

What precisely happened ?

How could it have happened ?

Did it really happen ?

We have to make up our own minds as to what we believe.

The stranger asked them:

What are you discussing together as you walk along ?

And they poured out their sad story, to someone who seemed so willing to listen.

How wonderfully kind and compassionate is our Lord.

He could well have ticked them off, to say the least, for their lack of faith in him.

Hadn't he told them that:

Unless a seed dies, it abides alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit.

But Jesus doesn't berate them.

But rather, in his infinite courtesy, Jesus remembered the frailty of over-strained nerves and bewildered minds and came, not suddenly or overwhelmingly, but in a way which He alone could do.

The way that Jesus dealt with the situation is a lesson to all that are in a position to help those who have lost hope.

They need companionship.

They need a listening ear, before a stream of good advice.

The last thing they need is a brisk "cheering up" talk or being told to "snap out of it".

Instead, let us be there with them.

Let's love them by listening, by accepting what it is that they feel.

Life has many distractions - hard work, routine, tiredness, ill health, as well as the loss of a loved one.

Any of which can grind us down, so that we carry on mechanically, never lifting our eyes, or minds, from the dust of the earthly road we travel.

We become unaware of the glory and strength of His presence with us.

Life loses its meaning and leaves us washed out.

But the Emmaus story gives us hope.

Jesus is still here.

He is the unseen "stranger", walking with us, listening to us, and, if we are willing to hear his voice, revealing himself to us.

The disciples two-hour journey, from Jerusalem to Emmaus, must have seemed like five minutes, being so wrapped up in the absorbing conversation with the Lord they hadn't yet recognized.

Luke informs us that:

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he was going further.

Jesus is a gentleman.

He won't force himself if he's not really wanted.

He waited for their invitation to come in.

And we can invite Christ into our hearts, or allow him to pass on.

In the vision of the Book of the Revelation we find his words:

I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

There's a famous picture that Holman Hunt painted of this scene.

Of Jesus knocking at a door - but there's no handle to it.

I expect there is a handle, but it's on the inside.

This is very much the situation in the Emmaus story.

We're told that:

Jesus acted as if he was going further.

It was a test to see if the disciples had more appetite for the things of God.

They did.

We're told:

They urged Jesus strongly, 'Stay with us.

That's the sort of invitation that Jesus can't resist.

He went in to stay with them.

Well, where are we in our experience ?

Are we still heart-breaking, because we need to meet the risen Christ ?

Perhaps we're still in a heart-searching process.

If so, let it continue, as it will surely lead to the heart-burning experience that we all need.

God longs deeply for each one of us to walk with Him, in close fellowship, so that He can fulfill His plans for our lives.

The Emmaus Two had no doubt walked that road many times before.

Yet this day would be different, for it was the time for a life-changing encounter with their Lord.

He can draw near to us at any time.

The ways of God aren't always obvious, so we must be open, to allow him to enlighten our understanding, to take us onto a new level in our spiritual experience.

Then life will never be the same again.

Lord - you are my rock and my refuge, be swift to help me.

You have assigned me my portion and my cup

you have made my lot secure and so I praise you.

Because you are at my right hand I will not be shaken,

Amen.