

Devotional Blog

Sunday 26th April

Do you remember those quaint old times when we thought that Brexit was the most important issue facing the country? One of the words that we heard a lot about in the Brexit debate was 'xenophobia', the fear of, or even the hatred of, strangers. In the beautiful story (Luke 24:13-35) of the journey on the Emmaus road we come across the opposite concept 'philoxenia', the love of the stranger. Two grief-stricken disciples trudge back from Jerusalem at dusk on what we call Easter day. Their leader has been killed, and even though some of the women disciples claim he has risen from the dead, the travellers can't believe such 'idle talk'. They meet a seemingly ill-informed stranger and receive a Bible study session like no other. When they reach Emmaus, they open their home to the stranger and sit down to supper. The penny drops. They know the stranger, for he is none other than their leader, he is the risen Jesus. Suddenly everything has changed. They charge back to Jerusalem to share the most amazing story of all time. The disciples have travelled, not just down that road but from ignorance to knowledge, and from encounter to transformation.

There are so many themes in this most developed appearance story that we could have it as a Bible lesson for a month of Sundays without any repetition. In these days of

lockdown, the story provides insights into hospitality, how we recognise Jesus and provides helpful guidance for our journey in life.

Every church community is judged by the hospitality it offers to newcomers. A church is an organisation that is run for the benefit of its non-members. Jesus gives the two saddened disciples the opportunity to show hospitality, and they pass the test. Jesus joins them at the supper table and goes from stranger to guest to host. Food fellowship is a strong feature of Luke's Gospel, and is a key part of any Church's hospitality. How we embrace and support "even the least" will be how we and our church are to be held to account (Matthew 25:31-46). The stranger may well be someone we don't recognise. Jesus will often be in the people we help. We have a God of surprises!

As we journey through these challenging times, we must not let physical isolation lead to xenophobia. Hospitality must be at the heart of our faith. When things are bleak for us it's easier for us not to see Jesus in the stranger. But he is waiting to become a guest in our lives. Our prayers will help us to see the Holy Spirit working in those around us, yes, even in the most unlikely of people. We recall that the Bible is full of times when God worked his purpose out through apparently marginalised folk, and sometimes through total unbelievers.

There's somewhere else that we want people to recognise Jesus: in us! Christ is the host within by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Our acceptance of Jesus as the guest in our daily lives means that we are always striving to imitate him.

Several Bible scholars have argued that the unnamed disciple on the road to Emmaus was a woman, that she might even have been Cleopas' wife. So why no name? It could be a cultural thing, but Luke is acknowledged to be the most positive of the Gospel writers on gender issues. Could it be a clever device that Luke is employing in the story? Is he trying to include us, a sort of "write your name here" moment? Brothers and Sisters, we can find ourselves on the road to our Emmaus, a place we go to when we are full of grief, a place we go to escape. On that road we too have the chance through our individual and collective hospitality to welcome in Jesus. When we do, it can't stay private. We must tell the world, even if many will think it's an "idle tale". Just like the downcast disciples travelling the Emmaus road we too can burn with understanding as we open our scriptures to learn about God.

We will be free again for our hearts to burn in the intimacy and hospitality of breaking bread with others, be they friends or strangers. We do this because we are the bearers of hope. Jesus is alive, in us! Praise the Lord!

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