

## *Minds opened to understand*

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*Acts 3:12-20; Psalm 4; 1 John 2:15-17, 3:1-6; Luke 24:36-48*

Last Tuesday morning, some of the clergy in this Deanery had breakfast together at Old Parliament House. Somehow the conversation got on to the parlous state of ecumenism — the quest for greater visible expression of the Church's unity. Within the separated churches, it is almost never on the agenda! In that conversation, I guess it was only to be expected that I would be asked 'why this is so'.

So, why? Why is it that there often seems to be a lessening of enthusiasm for the ecumenical endeavour? No doubt there are all sorts of reasons at all the different levels of the churches. Some think that because we are no longer throwing stones at one another, enough has been achieved already. More seriously, some think that a major reason is that the classic ecumenical endeavour during the last 100 years was focussed on addressing the issues that caused the divisions that came from the 16th Century Reformation in Western Europe. And that is where such progress has been made — and still needs to be made. But now there is a new source of division — a new kind of fracturing — that runs not so much between the denominations but through them. Consequently, the denominations have turned from reaching out to others to looking inwards on themselves. And this new source of tension and fracture basically comes down to the question of how we are to read and understand the Bible.

Let's take Anglicans as an example! We all know something of the tensions that have emerged in the Anglican Communion in recent years, culminating in the refusal of some bishops to attend the Lambeth Conference last year. There are a few obvious reasons: ordination of women; issues of sexuality. But underneath particular issues is the claim by many, who take the more conservative line, that they are bible believing. In an interview just prior to his retirement, the former Bishop of Oxford said across the whole of his 20 years as bishop, what loomed large in his memory was the crisis that followed the nomination of Jeffrey John to be an area Bishop within the diocese in 2004. He said he had not anticipated the huge pressure from the rest of the Anglican Communion, nor the unprecedented rift amongst the bishops in the CofE. What upset the diocese, he said, was that it was so divisive. "But the issue was not just sexual orientation: it was about how Christians read the Bible".

That is one story. There are many others, and not only in the Anglican Church. Most of them will be either directly about the Bible or about a particular issue regarding which the Bible is being used and understood differently. And various labels get tossed around to characterise people's different views about the Bible: literalist, fundamentalist, liberal. The Bishop of Oxford said the basic difference is a division between those who follow the historical-critical method of reading the Bible and those who give a 'flat' interpretation. And in the Bishop's opinion (and mine) that kind of interpretation shows no awareness of the kind of document the Bible really is. But that is the heart of the dilemma.

So, let's look at our gospel reading and what it has to say. The first thing I would draw attention to is the apparent ambiguity in the experience described. The disciples are together in a room, and they have already heard reports from several that the risen Christ has been encountered. In this version of the story — Luke's version — Jesus has already appeared to several of the women, but the men would not believe them. But then Luke tells the story of the experience of two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and when we pick up Luke's version this morning, those two have just got back to report their experience and found that Jesus has also appeared to Simon Peter. Then, just as they are rejoicingly exclaiming, *The Lord is risen*

*indeed*, Jesus appears among them, and we are told they were terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost. And then even after he shows them his hands and his feet and asks them to feel them to convince themselves, the gospel text still says, somewhat cryptically, ***While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.*** Now that may simply mean "they still couldn't believe their eyes", but even so, it still seems like the whole event is a bit too overwhelming for anyone to be too certain about just what was happening or what it meant. You can be fairly certain from the recorded testimony of these disciples that they experienced something mind-blowing that turned their world on its head. But when what is recorded is the witness of those whose whole previous knowledge of what was and was not possible was just being blown apart, you are really clutching at straws to try to reconstruct the physiology and biochemistry of the resurrection from what they said. They are just not those kinds of stories!

Then Luke has that very interesting line in his gospel: ***he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...*** Jesus opened their minds. And it was only with their minds opened that they could understand the scriptures. What does that mean? Usually, when we talk about being open-minded, we mean that a person is open to more than one possible interpretation of things. They may have their own point of view, but they don't dismiss other views out of hand. They are willing to hear, consider and perhaps re-evaluate their own views in light of what others think.

So, if Jesus had to open the minds of those who had been with him in order that they could understand the scriptures, what chance have we got? The scriptures were mostly written from within a Jewish culture and reflect a Jewish world-view. The disciples were Jewish. We are not. Their scriptures had all been written in the previous 1000 years. For us, our scriptures were written two to three thousand years ago. And the world has changed far more in the last 50 years than it did in the whole 1000 years before the disciples lived. The Bible uses literary styles and imagery that were familiar to the disciples, but are obscure for us. So what hope have we got?

Of course, it is not hopeless! When you get to know someone well, you understand the different ways they speak at different times, and without thinking about it you adjust and interpret accordingly. You are able to tell when things they say are not literally true — you know when they are telling a story, when they are joking, or being serious.

In reading the scriptures, it is also necessary to adjust and interpret. When, for example, Psalm 137 says blessed are those who smash Babylonian babies against rocks, we are not to interpret it in the same way as when the first Letter of John says, "God is love". If every word of Genesis was supposed to be interpreted as literal history, you could get confused trying to work out what it means by God creating day and night three days before the creation of the sun and moon. What is happening in those stories is that a faith conviction is being conveyed by means of a story; they are not literal history, let alone science. To read them as such is an example of a 'flat' interpretation. We need to understand the scriptures as being just as full of stories, figures of speech, jokes, generalisations, rhetorical flourishes, as any other piece of literature, and are to be read and interpreted accordingly. We need to understand that the Bible contains a plurality of voices: in it, we hear the voices of the communities out of which it came and the voices of the writers who composed it. The voices sometimes conflict with one another: it contains voices of oppression and protest against oppression, voices of conventional wisdom and subversion of conventional wisdom. But in, with, and under those voices, we are to listen for and respond to the divine voice.

***Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures...*** That's the clue. What is essential is our getting to know Jesus Christ. The risen and living Christ! We are actually in a similar position to these first disciples. Like them, our understanding of the Bible arises from our

relationship with Christ, not the other way round. If we want to know Christ, we need to pray; and we need to read the Bible prayerfully and regularly. The scriptures contain the foundational documents of our faith: we need to know — be immersed in — our faith story as it has been handed down to us in the many documents that make up the scriptures. And we need to read them and interpret them through what we know and understand of Jesus as the Christ of God. We encounter him in them, esp. in the gospels. But it is fascinating to think about the experience of the two on the Emmaus road. There, too, we are told that he explained to them the scriptures. But it was not in the explanation that they recognised the risen Christ. It was around a table, in the breaking of bread, that they recognised him.

That is true for us as well. It is here, at the table of the Eucharist, that we too encounter the risen Christ, and we take that experience back into our reading and understanding of the scriptures. The Word of Scripture and the sacrament of the bread and wine belong together. And so we can let the story of today's gospel be a parable of what happens to us. We gather here to meet the risen Christ, who heals our doubts, calms our fears, opens our minds and fills us with life. And the better we get to know this Christ, the more fully that life giving Word — encountered in scripture and sacrament — will penetrate our hearts and minds, our lives. We cannot explain how it happens. But the risen Christ does meet us in the scriptures and at the table. It's a mystery. Yet it is the truest thing we will ever experience.