

The Road to Nowhere?

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Third Sunday of Easter, Year A — 23 April 2023

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Acts 2.14a,36-41; Psalm 116.1-4,11-18; 1 Peter 1.13-25; Matthew 28.8-15a

*When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you'.
—words from TS Eliot's poem, "Wasteland."*

*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.
—words from Matthew's gospel.*

Back in 1986, Susan and I went on our first trip to New Zealand. We decided to travel with Contiki Tours, I think they're still going—holidays for the under 30s. Anyway, each tour has a t-shirt and a theme song which is played every morning on the bus, ours was 'Road to nowhere' by Talking Heads, when I hear that song, I am reminded of that trip.

The philosopher and anthropologist René Girard says: "in our post-modern world we believe ourselves to be moving away from Christ, just as the disciples on the way to Emmaus think they are leaving the dead Christ behind." Our culture in the west is one that is quickly exiting Christianity, at least the Christianity as we have known it, but it doesn't know where it is going other than it is going away from something. That's why we call our age "post-modern." There is a sense in which many believe that we have outgrown something too small and are on the search for something bigger. Many in their disillusionment, disenchantment perhaps, are heading to Emmaus, but they don't know where it is.

Indeed no one knows where Emmaus is. The gospel tells us that it is seven miles from Jerusalem. But there is no historical evidence of a place ever existing in the seven miles around the ancient city. Has Luke invented a place, a fiction, and has he done so deliberately; were the first disciples on the 'road to nowhere?' Is Emmaus perhaps a place that we will know when we get there and have an experience of the risen Jesus. Is this Emmaus for us this morning? I pray that it is; but importantly is this a place that those who are heading away might just find their hearts warmed and glimpse a sense of the risen Christ?

Our translation tells the story this way: "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them." Now, "talking and discussing" is rather a tame version compared to the original Greek. A more accurate rendition would be that they were hotly hurling opinions back and forth at each other. They were having an intense dispute, a fight. In the midst of their fight, Jesus approaches them and they don't recognize him. He asks, "What have you been throwing back and forth at each other as you walked?" His question brings them to a halt and, "they stand still looking sad." Clearly for these two nothing really made sense. They do sound a lot like a couple of post-moderns, don't they!?

There are few pieces of gospel more important to our spirituality than the story of the road to Emmaus. I recall being part of a group of ordinands who were asked, "What is the first liturgy?" I waxed lyrical about the liturgy of Hippolytus which was about 200AD; I was studying it at the time. I thought I was pretty good. "No," said the priest leading us . . . it is the road to Emmaus." The scriptures are recalled and interpreted, and bread is broken; in these ways Christ is present to us. We are all about the presence of Christ, the risen Christ—in our midst. In Word and sacrament, in ethic and mission.

I like to think of the meal in Emmaus as the first liturgy; it appeals to the ‘liturgical me.’ But there is much more to it. What is significant is the journey; we cannot have the liturgy without the journey. This is the challenge that we face today in our particular corner of the Church. We know, don’t we, that it is not always easy for folk to just come among us and engage. If we were to go to church at Hillsong for example we would enjoy the music, the spectacle the exuberance! It may be great worship, but it isn’t liturgy. The word liturgy literally means the work of the people, it requires of us a sense of having journeyed here.

For some the Emmaus road is the weekly walk through everyday life. There are folks whose lives are marked from time to time by disappointments, dashed hopes, health, financial or relationship worries, estrangement. For others the Emmaus road is a lifetime, a walk marked by intergenerational trauma, poverty, disadvantage, tragedy, the struggle for identity, purpose or meaning. For most of us, it might simply be a journey of apathy, cynicism, or doubt. Whatever it is for us, it is walking away from the dead Jesus. Like those two it is ‘the road to nowhere’ and they, we, are intercepted as it were on the way.

Liturgy intercepts us, interrupts us. It is meant to alarm us, pull us up. Make us stop. I cannot think of a better interpretation than that offered by TS Eliot in “Little Gidding,” one of the *Four Quartets*. He writes:

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,
It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid . . .

And towards the end of the poem, he writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Every time we come here it is different and yet the same. Because every time we come, we are different. Perhaps we have found ourselves on that road again. But once again, we have been intercepted, we have arrived, and it is different, and the bread is broken and we glimpse Christ, albeit fleetingly. But as Peter told his exiled correspondents in their own despondency . . . it is good news. I pray it will be enough. Amen.