**Sermon: Walking the Emmaus Road**

**Bible Reading:** Luke 24:13-35

**Preacher**: Mike

I’m sure that we can all think of times when we’ve felt disillusioned when someone hasn’t turned out to be what we thought they’d be. Perhaps a catastrophic date, perhaps when meeting a childhood hero, perhaps when someone in a position of power and authority recommends injecting yourself with bleach!

I remember once excitedly meeting a boyhood football hero of mine and then feeling so let down by his rudeness and extremely profane language -and I was wearing my dog collar!…perhaps it was because I was wearing my dog collar!

Sadly, this sort of disappointment is all too common in our world, mainly because we have a culture with an appetite for building people up and then dropping them from a great height to an unforgiving earth. We seem to only deal with heroes and villains – a person or an institution is either the best thing since sliced bread or a complete failure to be dismissed and derided. The reality, clearly, is very different. We are all capable of both the best and worst of behaviours, but any sense of understanding that simple truth is often absent.

In our Gospel reading today, we hear a story of how this sort of hero/villain reasoning was applied even in Biblical times. Two of Jesus’s followers are returning from the scene of what they thought was going to be the greatest of triumphs – Jesus accepted by the masses and appointed to lead them to a brighter future – only to then face the reality that he was just another man who failed to stand up to the authorities and, when nailed to a cross, had died just like any other man. We find them trudging back home, expectations dashed and nursing their disappointment like an Evertonian on the way back from Wembley…or any away fixture come to that! (As a Blackpool fan, I am in no position to gloat!)

We actually don’t know much about the two crestfallen figures trudging their way along the road. One is referred to as Cleopas and the other may be his wife or a friend. They are likely to have been part of the extended group of Jesus’s followers, possibly present at the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, and their conversation indicates that they have been around the city for at least some part of the following week. Interestingly, it seems as though they have remained after the crucifixion, perhaps hoping for another miracle – a last minute equaliser - but nothing has happened other than a few confused reports that they obviously don’t believe carry much weight.

They are trying to make sense of all this – perhaps wondering how they got it so wrong, perhaps even a little bitter and resentful - when, out of nowhere, Jesus joins them and begins to question why they are so forlorn. The two disciples don’t recognise him and there is a thick slice of irony present in their response to Jesus “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who hasn’t heard what’s happened during the last few days?”

Clearly, they are the ones who haven’t understood and Jesus tries to explain how what they see as terrible disappointments are in fact what they should have expected and what will become the beginnings of something marvellous! Yet, even at this point, though they seem to be accepting of what is being said, they clearly don’t recognise the one saying it as Jesus. It is only when they insist that the stranger on the road joins them to eat in their home, and Jesus then breaks the bread, that their eyes are finally opened.

It is very easy for us to wonder how on earth these two disciples could have possibly failed to notice their hero – the one who just a few days ago had mattered so much to them. But, we are all capable of ignoring reality when we feel wounded or abandoned. The Emmaus Road experience is one that can speak to all of us and has been described by the theologian, Frederick Buechner as follows:

*“The Emmaus Road is the place we go in order to escape – a bar, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, “Let the whole damned thing go hang. It makes no difference anyway.” …Emmaus may be buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a second-rate novel or even writing one. Emmaus may be going to church on Sunday. Emmaus is whatever we do or wherever we go to make ourselves forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest decay and die; that even the noblest ideas that men have had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish men for selfish ends.”*

We might wish to add to this that Emmaus is sitting in an all too familiar room, taking a lonely walk, raging on social media, or drinking too much.

Many of the things that in normal times are sources of joy and hope to us have been taken away and are not likely to return in the immediate future. And our reaction may be one of despair or even anger. On the Emmaus Road, we don’t see the hope that is alongside us and we become wholly fixated on what is wrong, on what is lost.

And yet, the most telling thing for me in the Emmaus story is that hope returns in an act of kindness. When the disciples insist on feeding the stranger they have just met on the road, goodness is somehow restored and a whole new outlook is made possible.

I believe that this simple truth applies to us all. In reaching out to others, in letting go of our own interests, our eyes can be reopened and we become able to recognise hope in our world once more. Perhaps the strange and difficult blessing in all of this is that some time on the Road may well be necessary for us to find this truth.

Through exercising hospitality and in breaking bread together, the two disciples finally recognised Jesus. The gloom was lifted, the light shone in and they saw clearly that the promises of new life had been fulfilled. A new future, a better future was now possible.

The road that we walk at the moment offers considerable challenges, but there is light to be found as well when we give generously to others, when we exercise kindness and show willingness to journey with those who walk in darkness. In these testing times, I hope that we would all be able trust in this light, perhaps recognise new truths about ourselves and how we live, and then be able to carry this forward into new ways of being.

Let us pray…