

Sermon for Easter 3

Mother Emma

Reading: Luke 24:36-48

Last week I mentioned that I was always faintly amused by St John's understated description of the disciples, when faced by the sight of the risen Christ in their midst, as being "glad".

John is a theologian, who seeks to go straight to the heart of the matter he is describing and understand it in spiritual terms as part of the revelation of who Christ was, rather than focusing on the narrative detail of those around him.

St Luke, whose take on this story we hear today, is on the other hand, a consummate storyteller. From his pen we have the beautiful record of the Nativity in the stable, with the evocative and memorable stories of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Luke's description of Jesus' Resurrection appearance to his disciples, as they take refuge in a closed room, is full of perceptive insight into the way such an occurrence might actually have felt.

The disciples are initially described as startled and terrified, frightened and doubtful. And even as Jesus speaks to them reassuringly, explaining and demonstrating the truth of what they are seeing, we are told that even then "in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering..."

This is a far cry from St John's broadbrush description that they were "glad" to see him, but it describes emotions we can all imagine feeling in such an extraordinary situation; the much-loved friend who has been seen to die a terrible death, has returned – still with the scars of his suffering – to share food with them.

Some have questioned **why**, despite the reports of the women who went to the tomb and found it empty, and then the testimony of the disciples who had already encountered him on the road to Emmaus, both of which have been previously mentioned in Luke's Gospel, they were quite so astonished.

They have heard Jesus explain to them many times during his ministry that he would go to Jerusalem and die; there have been multiple hints, and even the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures, with their description of the suffering servant and others, which might have prepared them for this moment. Yet the physical presence of one presumed dead is truly breathtaking.

This is perhaps the moment when they first encounter the reality of the true nature of Christ, which has been revealed to them piecemeal over the years in his presence.

This week we have been aware of so many tributes, reflections, critiques and appreciations of the life of His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh. It has been a reminder that sometimes it is only when life draws to a close, that we may glimpse something of the whole picture of a person. Perhaps when so much attention is suddenly drawn to a single life; so many individual moments, actions or relationships assembled, as we begin to see the story unfold of a life filled with human virtues and gifts and the occasional weakness or error, that we can see how much a person has achieved or meant to others.

Of course, in a normal existence, we have to do this entirely for ourselves, but in the case of the disciples, Jesus himself is able to open their minds to understand the Scriptures; to help them reflect on all the teaching they have heard from the Bible and from Christ himself, which can help his true identity and story fall into place. He reminds them that he has told them all this before, that they have had the benefit of the descriptions of the Messiah in the Holy Scriptures all their lives, and yet that it takes this moment of revelation for it all to make sense.

This moment is also the call to action for the apostles, who will build the Church we know. What has been, or needs to be our own moment of revelation for us to understand the place of Christ in **our** lives?

Many of us, in a similar way to the disciples, will have grown up with the benefit of Bible stories or school assemblies or prayers; perhaps attendance at Sunday School and a cultural awareness of such touching and heartfelt national moments of Christian worship as the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral yesterday afternoon. Some of us have perhaps encountered all of these later in life; the secularization of much school teaching of RE in the 1970s, for example, means that a great many people have grown up much less aware of the stories of the Bible which underlie our faith. We may be regular churchgoers, who hear the Psalms, hymns and stories of our childhood repeated week by week.

Yet what forms the central moment at which we hear Christ's voice, in which we make the decision to turn to him, to follow his teaching and the practice of his Church, to go back once again to things half-heard or understood, to try to find the deepest meaning within them and to experience his love?

This Thursday, five young people and eight adults from St Mary Abbots, together with an additional twenty-one others from local churches, will be confirmed here by the Bishop of Kensington into the Christian faith of the Church of England.

It is a moment of great significance for them, as they make their public profession of faith and hear the Bishop invoke the Holy Spirit to inspire and bless their lives, leading them forward in faith. It is not a step to be undertaken lightly.

Even though we are sadly limited by Covid restrictions to inviting only a few invited guests per person and cannot rejoice together as a community as normal, we hold every one of our candidates this week in our prayers and we pray that this may be for them a moment of revelation, as Christ speaks to them and as the teaching and experiences they have received fall into place.

And perhaps this is also a moment for us to remember our own Confirmations, or coming to faith, to re-kindle the sense of revelation and inspiration, as like the disciples in the upper room, we recall the centrality of Christ's love, his story and his call to action in each of our lives.

Amen.