

## Easter 3

### Luke 24:13-35

#### Mother Emma

About ten years ago, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I visited one of the several different sites which all lay claim to being the original village of Emmaus, where, as we just heard in our Gospel reading, the risen Christ was recognised by the two disciples in the breaking of bread. The story of the hunt for the real Emmaus is a fascinating one – the exact location seems to have been in some doubt from the time of the Byzantine Empire, right up to the wranglings of American, European and Israeli Biblical scholars today.

Originally, people seem to have associated the first-century *city* of Emmaus, some thirty miles from Jerusalem, with the Gospel story, but this is open to dispute, as the name Emmaus is a common one, derived from a Hebrew word meaning “*source of warm water*”. The disciples could not possibly have travelled 30 miles each way on foot in one evening, which suggests that we should be looking somewhere much closer to Jerusalem. My group in the Holy Land visited a different suggested Emmaus site which was considerably closer, at the village of Abu Ghosh.

The Arab-Israeli village of Abu Ghosh has been the site of fierce fighting during Israel’s history, but at the time we visited seemed a peaceful haven for visitors and pilgrims. The Crusaders, who, almost a thousand years ago, selected this site as the true Emmaus, built a beautiful church at the entrance to the village, now run by a Benedictine community of monks and nuns.

We celebrated the Eucharist in their simple stone chapel, before descending to visit the site of an ancient Crusader baptistery underneath the chapel, where devout Crusaders came for baptism in the spot where they believed the risen Jesus had been made known. As we listened to the Gospel reading we have just heard, sang and broke bread together in the prayerful stillness of the peaceful Abbey, with the sound of birdsong from the garden clearly audible through the open doors, we shared with the Crusaders the hope that in this beautiful place, Christ himself had broken bread.

But does it actually matter whether the Crusaders or the Byzantine pilgrims who claimed to have found Emmaus - or the modern scholars who more recently have identified other possible sites, were correct? Doesn’t the power of this story dwell rather in our own imaginations, or in the message it conveys, than in one particular geographical location?

The story of Christ’s appearance on the Road to Emmaus has inspired some of the most famous works of art and literature in the Western world. The image of the disciples, trudging despondently along the country road, their eyes dazzled by the rays of the setting sun, who fail to recognise in the mysterious stranger the friend and leader for whom they are grieving, is an immensely powerful one, and one which any one of us might imagine in our mind’s eye. You may have seen Caravaggio’s depiction in the National Gallery of the moment at supper when the disciples suddenly recognise Jesus over the bread and wine.

Meanwhile in T S Eliot's poem, "The Wasteland", the **image** of the journey to Emmaus is clearly to be found in the question, "*Who is the third who always walks beside you?*" Perhaps it is here in this very question that we find the answer to our question about the importance of the hunt for the true Emmaus.

It **would** be an amazing experience for visitors and pilgrims to the Holy Land to stand with certainty where the risen Christ himself was a companion on the journey, or revealed himself in the breaking of the bread, but as T S Eliot obliquely reminds us, Christ **ALWAYS** walks beside us, whether on the original journey to Emmaus, on Kensington High Street, or today in places torn apart by darkness and conflict, the Holy Land among them. He accompanies us on our journey from birth to death, from joy to sorrow and back again, in times of hope and of despair.

The disciples on the road had turned their backs on the crucified Jesus; they were walking dejectedly away, giving up on him and returning to their everyday existence without him. Yet he was still there with them, accompanying them on that journey, too, revealing the power and glory of God to them through his interpretation of the Scriptures, and causing their hearts to burn within them.

We may understand the Crusaders who built the baptistery beneath the Emmaus monastery in the hope that their baptisms could take place where Jesus had broken bread, yet as we come today to baptise Clara, Bear and Wolf, we may know ourselves to be in a place where Christ always walks beside us, where we hear his voice in the Scriptures and where we meet him Sunday by Sunday in the breaking of bread.

In the questions asked of Bear, Wolf and Clara's parents and godparents, we shall hear, as at every baptism: "*In baptism these children begin their journey in faith. You speak for them today.. Will you help them to take their place within the life and worship of Christ's Church?*" Perhaps the story of the journey to Emmaus, tells us this. From today, Wolf, Clara and Bear will be filled with Christ's grace, and part of his pilgrim people on earth. He will always be with them on their journey, even if there are times when public worship slips from the top of their priorities or if, metaphorically speaking, they turn their backs and are walking away.

BUT I believe this story teaches us that it is as we travel within the life and worship of the church, hearing the Scriptures and sharing in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread that we truly come to recognise the Risen Christ, and are empowered, like the disciples that night, to share the truth and joy of his story with those around us.

This is my heartfelt prayer for Clara, Bear and Wolf, and for their families, as they set out together, with Christ beside them, on their journey in faith.

Amen.