

Today I'd like to reflect for a few moments on Luke chapter 24, verses 13-35, which in my Bible is entitled "The road to Emmaus". Let's read the passage...

These two followers of Jesus are obviously not members of the Twelve disciples, or the Eleven as they are now, because Judas has taken his own life. One of them is totally unnamed and even Cleopas appears nowhere else other than in this passage. But these men *are* just like the rest of the disciples, because they are obviously struggling with their doubts and confusion over what has happened to Jesus over the last week.

For years, I always believed that the opposite of faith was doubt, but recently I've been challenged to rethink that idea. The dictionary defines faith as "complete trust or confidence in someone or something." But I know from my own experience that I still doubt sometimes, even though I have faith. I think it's more accurate to see the opposite of faith as *self-sufficiency* and *entitlement*. Let's just unpack those ideas for a moment: a self-sufficient person would say "I've got all I need" or "I can provide all I need". An entitled person would say "I deserve this" or "I've worked for this". Neither of these attitudes leaves any space for genuine faith in someone else, because it's all about me. So, I want to say to you, doubt is not our enemy. I think this passage will help us to see that when doubt is handled constructively, it can help us to discover Christ's presence with us.

But how do we handle doubt constructively? Well I think firstly, we need to **face reality**, as these men do (in verses 13-24). The events of the last week had taken their toll on all the disciples, raising uncomfortable questions and shattering dreams. In verse 19, Cleopas describes Jesus as having been "a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people". Before his death they called him not just a prophet but the Messiah, but how could they do that now? In verse 21, he says "we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel". In other words, they had hoped he would free the Jewish nation from Roman occupation and bring in the Kingdom of God. But again, how could he do that now? Then Christ came alongside them and opened them up to new

possibilities with his questions (in verses 17 & 19). If we are prepared to face the reality of our experiences and allow Christ to draw alongside us in them, we can discover new possibilities as well. We know that the reality of our present situation in Britain and across the world is frightening and confusing. But if we are prepared to allow Christ to walk with us in these difficult days, we can find new resources for the journey.

As well as facing reality, we also need to **see the big picture**, as these men do (in verses 25-27). Jesus had consistently told the disciples that there would be a heavy cost to his mission, but they had never properly understood this. I wonder whether you remember the teaching series we were partway through when the lockdown happened in mid-March? I'd called it "the upside-down kingdom", and through various events in the book of Judges, we saw that the values of God's kingdom are opposite to the values of the empires of this world (whether those "empires" are countries, economic trading blocs or multinational corporations). Jesus picked up this same idea and often told his disciples that the way to true "greatness" was not through success and gaining a massive following, but rather through serving, suffering and being prepared to give your life for your beliefs.

So with these two men on the road to Emmaus, it is when Jesus breaks the bread, reminding them of what was said at the Last Supper ("This is my body, broken for you") that they realise who he is. And of course, the realisation is not just that he was broken, but that he is now risen. From Christ's brokenness, new life sprang up. And from the broken and hurting places in our lives, God can bring new life. From the brokenness and hurt of a world in fear and lockdown, God can bring a new sense of reality, which if it is recognised, I believe can kindle hope and love.

Having faced reality and seen the big picture, we can now recognise that Christ is **closer than we think**, as these men do (in verses 28-35). They have expressed great doubts as to who Jesus was and what he had achieved, and yet the Lord doesn't give up on them. He chooses to stay and eat with them. And I think the risen Christ shows he has a sense of

humour here, because as soon as they recognise him, he disappears! Interestingly, when these men reflect on it afterwards (in verse 32), they sort of knew it was Jesus, but couldn't quite see it. Similarly, in our times of discouragement, doubt and frustration, the risen Christ is closer than we think. And I want to finish by saying that, I do not *in any sense* believe that God has brought this virus upon the world as a punishment. But I *do* believe that God is with us in this fearful time and can use it to help humanity to see that, despite our great technological advances, we cannot control everything. Let's pray that out of this time of heartache and tragedy, that we human beings can develop more humility about our achievements, more solidarity with each other and greater responsibility towards this world that is a gift for us all to cherish.

I pray that you will be able to see and know God's blessing and goodness in your life this week.