

BURNING HEARTS AND BREAKING BREAD

Acts 2:36-47

Luke 24:13-35

Break bread

I wonder what you think of when you see me do this? Is it the same thing you would think about if someone who wasn't a minister did it - or if we weren't in church? Chances are, you're thinking of communion, and with good reason.

When Cleopas and his friend saw Jesus break the bread they recognised who he was, even as they had not in all their long conversation on the road. But they weren't at the last supper. They weren't among the twelve in the inner circle of the disciples. What were they thinking of, and why did they recognise Jesus?

Breaking bread is obviously important to Luke. He highlights it in this story, and he insists on it in his description of the first church, born on the day of Pentecost. The people, we are told devote themselves to the apostle's teaching, the prayers and the breaking of bread. Then he tells us that they would break bread in their homes. All this insistence on bread. What is going on?

Let's set off with Cleopas and his friend - very likely it was his wife - disciples in general weren't all men, after all. They are leaving Jerusalem, where they have probably been for the Passover. They may even have been there since Palm Sunday, just a week before. Maybe when they came to the city it was as part of that cheering crowd of disciples. Now they leave it with such different emotions. Now they are returning to normal life, with an empty, dead feeling inside - rather the way that you may feel when you have to pick up the threads of life again after the funeral of a close friend or member of the family.

As they are going, Jesus appears and walks beside them. That's how things are, of course. If we stand around waiting for Jesus to appear, then chances are we'll miss him. It was when Simon Peter went fishing that Jesus came to meet him. It is as these disciples return to ordinary life that Jesus walks beside them. It is as we go on with our daily duties that Jesus comes to give us the strength, and to transform the common task - if we recognise his presence.

These disciples did not recognise him, and Luke makes it quite clear that the fault is not with their vision. "Their eyes," he says, "Were kept from recognising him." God prevented them from understanding who this was. And if we wonder why, then Cleopas is the one who gives us God's good reason. He describes Jesus as a prophet, and ends up saying, "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel." Some sources say that the phrase he used was "The one to set Israel free." Cleopas and his companion had not moved beyond a Palm Sunday understanding of who Jesus was. They were still looking for a national hero. If they were to recognise Jesus when their understanding was at this level, all the gaps in their knowledge would be left as they were, and they would set themselves up for the same disappointment all over again.

People who think that following Jesus means that their life will be free of trouble set themselves up for similar disappointment. Jesus never promised to be a national hero, and he never promised to be a personal insurance against difficulty, tragedy or pain. With all of Jesus' explanations the facts which so distressed the disciples had not changed. Jesus had indeed been handed over and put to death. There had indeed been no confirmation of the resurrection for them. The facts didn't change then, and they don't change now. There is still pain and grief to face, still

complex problems to puzzle over. Jesus has never said he came to do away with such things, but some people are not ready to hear that. They want Jesus to be what they think they need him to be.

Cleopas and his friend were more receptive, however. After all, Jesus didn't say to them "Hey folks, it's me!" No, on that walk of seven miles - that's the distance from Stow to Galashiels: it would take about two hours - they were prepared to listen while Jesus started with Moses and the prophets and explained God's ways to them. He started with Moses - this doesn't mean just with the story of Moses, but with what the Jews call the books of Moses, which we call the Pentateuch; the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Jesus didn't take isolated texts to make or prove his points, in the way of evangelical nineteenth century divines, or indeed in the way of at least one of the Gospel writers. Matthew is very fond of taking a text from the Old Testament and showing how Jesus fulfils it - sometimes having to stretch the meaning of that text to breaking point to do so. But this is not Jesus' way - we never see him doing that.

In this case the implication is that he took his listeners through the general trends of Scripture. Maybe he began in the Garden of Eden and talked of sin, disobeying God being the real problem, more fundamental than national identity. Maybe he did talk about Moses- about how when God was angry with the people of Israel and told Moses to stand aside so that he could blast them from the face of the earth, Moses refused, and asked God to take his own life instead. Not that God did, but it shows the trend that God's chosen leader must be prepared to die for the people. Maybe he referred to the passages from the prophet Isaiah which we read in Holy Week, which talk of God's chosen servant being bruised and broken for the sake of the people, having the iniquity of us all laid upon him. Or maybe he pointed to the prophet Jeremiah, and his determination to keep speaking God's message, even though at times it seemed it would bring him certain death.

Luke tells us that the tenet of his teaching was that the suffering of the Messiah was necessary, before he could enter any glory. It was necessary before he could really be the true Messiah, able to free, not only his own people, but all people from the effects of our sinfulness. His suffering wasn't, or shouldn't have been, unexpected.

And the two listeners are prepared to listen. We know this because they invite Jesus into their home when they reach the village. Hospitality was more ready in ancient times than in these days of suspicion in which we live, but still, you wouldn't invite someone in who you fundamentally disagreed with. Not if they were also a stranger.

They invite them in because, as they later acknowledge, their hearts are burning within them as he talks. There is a growing sense of excitement, of rightness. And wouldn't we all like to have that? So they invite him in.

He comes in, he breaks the bread, and God again causes the recognition. Their eyes were opened. So what was going on when Jesus broke the bread? It wasn't a communion meal in the formal sense. Breaking bread is a way of saying that we are eating together - eating together in a way that implies acceptance of each other.

"Even my bosom friend, in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me." complains David in Psalm 41 (v:9), the outrage being at the betrayal of that table fellowship. If we break bread with someone it implies that we are with them, we agree with them, there is a bond of trust between us.

And this is what it meant in the early church as well. They remembered the last supper, of course, but they weren't always having communion in the formal way

that we think of that sacrament. Instead, whenever they ate together - and they very often did eat together - whenever they broke bread, as part of an ordinary meal, they were reminding themselves and each other that they belonged together, because of their unity in Jesus.

Jesus broke bread and his friends recognised him. So too with us. We will recognise Jesus more and more as we invite him into our homes and listen to his voice. As we understand what it means that God's Messiah must first suffer and die. When we understand that it means that Jesus will not be whoever we want him to be. He won't be our insurance policy against death or disaster. He won't guarantee that we live in peaceful times. We recognise Jesus when we recognise that he has not come to change the individual circumstances of our lives. But he has come to make our hearts burn within us as we, not our circumstances, are changed. We learn from him, and we learn to meet him in the complexity of life, and then we know the difference the resurrection brings.

That the Messiah must suffer, because that was God's plan, was the gist of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, when the church was born. And the sequel was that the believers broke bread together. They recognised Jesus as God's Messiah, and they showed their mutual acceptance their unity in this understanding by breaking bread together.

Luke's insistence on this reinforces the Bible's message that we need each other to truly follow Christ. There may be people who, because of circumstances, cannot meet with other Christians, and still seek to follow Christ. But their experience of the risen Christ will be the thinner because of it. We take the meeting of Christians so much for granted that too often we think we can take it or leave it. But if you go to countries where it is harder to be a Christian - some of the Islamic countries, for instance - there you will find that people will risk anything to meet with others. For it is as we are together, breaking bread, sharing our mutual faith and trust, that our hearts burn within us, and we see the risen Christ.

We need each other. We need each other when life is hard for us, and grief comes. We need each other when life is joyful for us, and goes well. We need each other when the puzzles of the world overwhelm us. We need to be breaking bread - in communion, but also in day-to-day friendship with each other at home. We need to be together, and remembering Jesus with us, for then, whatever is our current preoccupation, it will be transformed, because we will be transformed by seeing the risen Christ.

The two disciples are ready to see Jesus because now they know what it means that he is the Messiah, that he suffered and died and rose again. Now they can see Jesus, and ironically, now that they can see and recognise him, he goes away. They have no need of his physical presence any more. And so the two disciples return along those seven miles, but now they are no longer troubled and perplexed. Now their hearts are burning within them and they are bursting to tell how they have recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread.