

31 On the Road to Emmaus

23:55 – 24:43

Jesus was dead, and the women, having got the spices ready, did no more, because it was now the Sabbath. They rested as the Law required. But on the day after the Sabbath, the first day of the week, as soon as day was dawning, they went to the tomb. They found that the stone closing it had been rolled away, but when they went inside they could not find the body. They were still trying to work out what this meant, when suddenly two men appeared in shining clothes. The women were terrified and stood looking down at the ground, but the men said, “Why are you looking for the living one among the dead?”

They had to be reminded, although he had told them in Galilee – for they had not known what to make of it – that the Son of Man was to be given up to the wickedness of the powerful, to be crucified, and to rise on the third day. Now, when the angel said it, they remembered, and they rushed back to tell his disciples and friends. But the disciples did not believe them. They too hadn't understood, and the women were not as convincing as the messengers from heaven. The eleven “apostles” could not make any sense of their report.

But the same day, two disciples were on their way to a village called Emmaus, a short distance from Jerusalem. As they were talking about everything that had happened, Jesus himself came up and was walking beside them, but for some reason they did not recognise him. He asked them what they were discussing as they went along so downcast, and they wondered at him: “Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has been going on?” “What do you mean?” he said. So they told him about Jesus of Nazareth, as far as they could: “He was a prophet whose words were powerful and inspiring, a man of great deeds before God and the people. But the chief priests and the rulers handed him over to be crucified; and we were hoping that he was the one to liberate Israel!”

They also told him how they had been disturbed and puzzled by the experience of some women who belonged to their company. These had gone to the tomb early in the morning, but his body wasn't there; and they had come back saying they had seen angels who told them he was alive. “So

some of our folk went to the tomb, and it was just as the women had said – but they didn't see him.”

Like many a well-crafted story, the gospel written by Luke ends back at the beginning, leaving us much the wiser for what we have learnt in the meantime. At Jesus' birth, the message of the angels had been received and understood, wonderful as it was. The shepherds had been sent to Bethlehem to see the Savior, and they had found the baby, as they had been told, laid in a feeding box. Then, everything had worked out smoothly and beautifully. Now, at the end, there is a kind of replay in reverse. First the women go looking, and then they are told by angels that he is not there. The result is all confusion and doubt: the disciples don't know what to make of it. Their confusion is the opposite of Miriam's calm, as she stored up in her memory everything she had heard.

Now they need Jesus himself to speak to them, to explain, to open their eyes. In the birth story, he was just a helpless baby, as you would expect. Everything happened around him and others did the doing and explaining. Now he has come into his maturity and everyone needs him. Even the angels can't make it clear, and cannot tell them where he is, only where he is not: “Why do you look for the living one among the dead?” They needed to hear Jesus again, as they had heard him in Galilee and in Jerusalem. Only he could make it clear.

And Jesus was with them, walking beside them on the road to Emmaus.

I have often wondered how the disciples failed to recognise Jesus – but I don't think it's so strange, altho Luke offers no explanation. One of the disciples was called Cleopas, a name we haven't heard before, and perhaps Luke means us to understand that they were not among those who had gone around with Jesus, or had seen him very often. We should also remember, that as Luke tells us, there had been two successful missions, first with the twelve and then with seventy-two going out with the good news. Perhaps there were already many who had come to put their hopes in Jesus without having seen him at close quarters. Or perhaps (as we shall see) they had been with that big crowd which Jesus had fed in the wilderness, and had noticed, more than anything else, how his hands had broken the bread he shared among them.

Besides, how does a person look when they have died and risen from the dead? Perhaps at the very least, the change was like meeting an old friend that you haven't seen for forty years. You might not recognise them. Perhaps also (this occurred to me when I met and talked with someone in modern

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Palestine) if you struck up an acquaintance with strangers, it was not polite to look them in the eye. Perhaps at first you spoke and listened without looking too pointedly.

“How slow you are to understand,” Jesus exclaimed, “and to believe what the prophets have told you! Wasn’t this how it had to be? that the Messiah should suffer and so enter into his glory?” Then Jesus went back to Moses and all the prophets, and explained from there everything the scriptures had said referring to him. We are not told what scriptures Jesus used or what proofs he drew from them. It is not necessary. We have already been referred back to the beginning, and we are to understand that it is everything we have been hearing in this gospel.

They had reached Emmaus, and Jesus made as if to carry on, but they pressed him to stay with them: “It’s late in the day, and nite will soon be coming on.” So Jesus went in with them, and when they were sitting down to a meal, he took some bread and spoke a blessing, then he broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and in that moment he was gone from them.

They didn’t waste time wondering where he had gone or why he had left them, for now they understood. “Weren’t we burning with excitement when he opened the scriptures up to us on the road?”

They hurried back to Jerusalem, where they found a crowd of disciples gathered. These already knew: “The Lord is risen, and has appeared to Simon.” The travellers were still talking about their experience on the road, and how they recognised him in the breaking of bread, when they realised that Jesus was standing among them. It was a shock and they were frightened, thinking they were seeing a spirit. But he said to them: “Why are you troubled? And why are all these doubts disturbing you? Look at my hands and my feet: it’s me. Touch me and see for yourselves. A spirit doesn’t have flesh and bones as you can see I have.” Since they still couldn’t believe it, for joy and astonishment, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” and they offered him a piece of fish. He took it and ate it as they looked on.

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None of the gospels reports the resurrection itself: that is, Jesus emerging from the tomb or “coming to life”. It is an event beyond experience or imagining. But they all report the empty tomb. His body was not there, not left to go the way of bodies after death. They all report “angels”, messengers

from heaven, who, in the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, confirm that he is not dead but living. And all the gospels tell us that the first witnesses of these extraordinary events were the women who went to the tomb early in the morning. The gospels of Matthew, Luke and John go on to tell of Jesus appearing to various followers: Miriam of Magdala, disciples and the apostles.

None of the gospels attempts to prove the resurrection, to marshal all the evidence so that you find yourself convinced by it. No arguments are made. Rather they are re-telling the story of those who, in those first few days, met Jesus – were gently confronted by him – and realised that he was alive. The gospels are concerned to tell us what that experience was. So, when Luke tells us of Jesus eating fish, he is not trying to give us some kind of crude proof that he was alive, but telling us how Jesus showed them that his life was real, physical and natural. They were not seeing a vision, however splendid, nor encountering a spirit. This was Jesus, whom they had known and touched before, whom they could know and touch again, who had eaten with them before and ate with them now.

Considering how fundamental the resurrection of Jesus is to the whole of Christian faith, it might appear to get too little coverage at the end of each gospel, but there are two good reasons for this, as I see it. One is that, for each of the writers, the resurrection is the confirmation and vindication of everything they have written in the gospel. It is this Jesus, Jesus whom the gospel has described, who is risen, and the living reality that now encounters us is the one they have already been telling us about, as he walked and spoke in Galilee and in Jerusalem.

And that present encounter is the second reason: that with the resurrection we have entered into the current experience of believers. For Mark, Matthew and John, the resurrection is the point at which the gospel story begins to be the story of the current community of believers. For Luke, in the way he tells the story, one major event is still to come, and the gospel will end with the apostles still waiting in Jerusalem for the “promise of God”, the giving of the spirit. So, for Luke, there is more to say about the risen Jesus. But that’s for later.

Meanwhile, Jesus opens their eyes, opens their minds to make the meaning of his death and his resurrection clear to them. And here again we must listen to what Luke is telling us, and has told us throughout the gospel, to hear and to understand what Luke is saying, for he is our link to the witnesses whose experience we are invited to share.

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First the angels had reminded the women of what Jesus told them in Galilee: that the Son of Man had to be given up into the hands of those who would kill him. Later Jesus told the disciples on their way to Emmaus, that “the Christ had to suffer this death and so enter into his glory”. Much depends on that little word “had to”.¹ It does not mean that some kind of fatalism was at work. Fatalism has no role in Israel’s history or scriptures and it is altogether absent from the gospel.

Nor does it mean that God arbitrarily decided to make Jesus’ death the way forward and then inspired the prophets to foretell it, and that, once it was written in the prophets, God and everyone else was bound to follow this course. That’s just another version of fatalism, with the whim of God deciding fate.

Nor does it mean that a painful death, or any death, is necessary to atone for sin and meet the requirements of God’s justice. God is well able and more than willing to forgive sin, and no conditions can be imposed upon God. God is not the prisoner of some law that limits God’s love and mercy. Whatever ideas or doctrines of atonement we have from other sources, they just have to be left aside for now, while we remember what we are told in the gospel.

It means that God is utterly serious in God’s commitment to Israel, and that the only way the rule of God will come about is as the fulfilment of God’s promise. The one who comes ultimately in God’s name will meet the whole reality of Israel, nothing left unshown or disguised, with the pure reality of God, nothing left to a merely human response. And in that meeting, because power belongs to Israel – to sinful humanity – power and the leaders of Israel will have their way. And because life and energy and adventure belong to God, God will have God’s way, the rule of God and the forgiveness of Israel. Zechariah and Miriam were right. When God meets Israel to fulfil God’s promise, it is to deliver peace, security and wholeness, salvation for the people, as God had promised Abraham.

The rule of God is not a theological or mystical abstraction but a concrete reality. It takes place as an event in history, in the history of a particular people, in the context of commitments already made and understood – that was the work of the prophets. It is not a general theory about humanity but a concrete offer to Israel, embedded in the relationship that God has already established with them. The covenant with Israel had not been allowed to fossilize, for it was an ongoing work of God, which too was the work of the

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prophets. When Israel failed to be the people of God it was revived and renewed so that it always pointed forward to a fulfilment, the full and definitive establishment of God's rule, which would be the salvation of Israel.

The proclamation of the kingdom and the coming of Jesus as its king is that establishment. Because it is real and concrete, it takes place in Israel, fulfilling the commitment of God. It will not go anywhere else except as the offer made to Israel. And God's encounter with Israel, when it finally comes about in all the depth and strength of God's reality, is Jesus standing before the powers that can render him up for crucifixion. There is, in the whole reality of God and God's rule now beginning on earth, no program for the use of any power that could prevent them doing as they choose.

The rule of God is not and will never be the imposition of power, but it is the gift of unlimited strength, energy, vision, adventure and life. Such a reality, if it is to be real in this concrete world and not just a poetic ideal, will be real in the concrete actuality of the nation of Israel: among the synagogue leaders, the wealthy, the legal experts, the priests, the Sanhedrin, the city of Jerusalem. And the reality is that they, if they choose to oppose the rule of God, have the power to put Jesus to death.

Jerusalem always rejected the prophets, for those who govern God's people are seduced like governments everywhere, by the taste of power. They want to be, as Israel wanted to be in the time of Samuel, a nation like the other nations,² not the special people of God. Just as Christian nations since then have always wanted to be kingdoms of power and not kingdoms of the Son of Man, and Christ is crucified again thru the centuries of Christian civilization. Jesus' death is necessary because it is the real outcome of the confrontation between the powers of Israel and the rule of God. It is necessary because it is the real outcome of the conflict between the modern nations which embody our power and the rule of God. It is necessary because in the end Pilate and the Sanhedrin agree to have Jesus crucified.

He had to suffer death because the most entrenched and determined resistance to the rule of God comes from our addiction to power, which we exercise mostly as nations and the leaders of nations, and the one who rules in God's name does not begin by avoiding that fact but by facing, enduring and outlasting it.

Jesus' death is necessary because the only way to affirm the kingdom of God and to establish it here on earth is to confront the rule of power, to bear the

² I Samuel 8: 1 - 9; 10: 17 - 19

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baton-blows of the British Indian police and to stand before the tanks of the People's Liberation Army; to leave your guns in the camp while the Indonesian militia are running amok among your people. And it is only in the coming of God's kingdom, God's rule among us, that there is hope, peace and salvation for Israel and for all the nations.

It was necessary for the Messiah to die and so to come into his glory because the rule of God does not stand safe and remote, calling us out of this world to join it somewhere else. Tho the rule of God has dimensions beyond death and beyond history, it is, in the first place, real in life and history as we now live them. Its reality here is no less than its reality beyond. The challenge to us is to believe and claim it here, or rather to let it claim us here, in the only world and life in which it meets us.

Being utterly real and true to the reality of God, Jesus submits to death. The commitment and the rule of God, now embodied in him, does not run away from Israel, and does not resort to a power that is alien to it, even to avert defeat. There now remains nothing of the kingdom of God that has not been affirmed and delivered at the very heart of Israel. There is now no corner of the life or the thoughts of the nation, where the rule of God has not been declared, in its uttermost reality.

And from there, death itself notwithstanding, it emerges as life, energy, strength and adventure that can now be offered as the rule of God, embodied in the concrete reality of this world, to Israel and to all the nations. The death of Jesus is our salvation because it gives us, it inaugurates in concrete historical reality, and in all its own unflinching reality, the kingdom or rule of God.

All we can do now is come to terms with it. But that is the glory and hope of it. We can come to terms with it. The resurrection of Jesus is our salvation because this is the way the kingdom of God in all its joy, strength, energy and adventure goes, and takes us with it. It leads not to the confusion and condemnation of those who resisted or failed the kingdom, but to a new, more powerful (!) preaching of repentance, an invitation not only to Israel but to all the nations to accept the kingdom that Jesus rules, even tho, with the Sanhedrin and Pilate, we have put him to death.

The "glory" into which Christ enters is not his heavenly reward and the honor surrounding him there. The glory of Christ is the role God confers on him, to rule the nations. When Jesus speaks of the Messiah (the Christ) entering into his glory, we are to think of the Son of Man, brought into the presence of God, to receive, as Daniel had foretold of Israel, rule over all the nations.

There is peace and salvation only with the coming of God's rule. There is no covenant for individuals, for us to be saved one by one as souls blessed in isolation. Jesus did not have to die in order to heal the sick and forgive sinners as each one came to him. But it was not enough, great though that work of God was. It was necessary for Jesus to go to Jerusalem, where Israel the entirety, the nation, the people, could be confronted, claimed and forgiven.

God deals with the sin of Israel – and the sin of all the nations – neither by ignoring it nor by punishing it, but by confronting it in all seriousness and accepting that confrontation – powerlessness in the face of power, humble service meeting greed and pride, God's love up against the will of man – as the beginning of the rule of God, the entry of the Son of Man. Jesus' death was necessary because the rule of God is not a myth or a doctrine but an event in the history and politics of this world – the event that redeems and saves them all.

And because it has happened, not a myth but an event in history, the ultimate rule of God has begun at last and Jesus has entered upon his kingdom. The Sanhedrin has been faced and has done what the Sanhedrin can do; Herod has been faced and has done the little that Herod can do; and Rome has been faced and has done what Rome, as the strongest power, has to do; and between them, Jesus is dead. And so they pass into history, and out of history, and are done with; while Jesus, risen to life, the Son of Man revealed at last, rules as the Son of God, and all space and time are subject to him.

The world has never before seen its ruler in the flesh. It has only ever found approximations and parodies, some who claimed the authority of gods and proved it by power and cruelty, some who sought to serve and protect their people but only half knew how to go about it. But when Jesus, the wandering teacher, goes about the villages of Galilee, the real kingdom of God is coming; and when Jesus the teacher goes to Jerusalem and there speaks to the people of Jerusalem in the courts of the temple, the kingdom of God is upon them – there is no more time.

When Jesus is crucified, and is risen, the rule of God is definitively declared upon earth; repentance and love of God can now take place, in the acceptance of that rule made manifest among us. Faith is now the belief and trust that lives not by the dated and discarded rules of the world, for all their power, but by the rule of God, which Jesus shows and teaches.

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Jesus, announced and born as the savior king, was a wandering teacher, but one who called for the same faithful obedience that is (ideally) given to a king. More than anything else, the gospel is a challenge – a highly subversive one – to the very idea of power as it pretends to shape and govern our societies, for it presents the Son of David, the God-sent King of Israel, as the man who lived and died without any recourse to the systems of power that are universal to governments and kings.

That Jesus came to a world ruled by kings, to be acknowledged by angels and shepherds as King of Israel, was a political statement in the profoundest sense. That he then proceeded to gather disciples and to teach such teaching as we have seen, and to heal the sick and the crippled without recruiting any of them into an army (the great David, in whose line he came, gathered fit fitting men around him³) opened an enormous credibility gap.

As it was ment to do. Luke, writing with the hindsight and experience of a Christian people two generations later, was challenging the world to believe in this wandering preacher and to acknowledge that he is indeed the king, with all the political, economic, moral and spiritual authority of the role, that his death and resurrection would reveal. He is the one whose rule will change the world.

And that is what we cannot accept. When Luke shows us a ruler who changes the rules of the world, we take refuge in our heresies and take comfort from the king who only rules in another world, whose domain is limited to the “personal” sphere of individual lives, whose rules are a separate Christian system alongside and not challenging the system for the world of nations.

But Jesus is the one given by God, the Savior, and the peoples of the world cannot be saved without being changed, without being ruled in the sphere of the mercy and generosity of God, in a new order which Jesus has begun to teach us. The gospel passed on by Luke will challenge the systems of the world and all of us who want to work out workable compromises with it. It will shake our comfortable security to the very foundations. For against all our manoeuvres there stands the proclamation of Heven:

“Today in David’s town has been born to you a savior. He is the Messiah, the Lord.” (2: 11)

and the declaration of Simeon:

³ cf II Samuel 23: 8 - 39

“Mine eyes have seen your salvation, prepared in the sight of all the nations, a light of revelation to the nations and the glory of your people Israel”
(2: 30f)

Here is one who will change the patterns of power, so that many will rise and many will fall in Israel. He will open up the secret thoughts, the fictions, the bluff, the compromises, by which we keep our world going. They will not be able to stay hidden in the light of his coming. And he will open up the secret thoughts, the hopes and longings of an oppressed and suffering people. They will keep silence no longer.⁴

He is risen, and the everlasting rule of the Son of Man has begun. He is alive and walks with us, opening our minds and firing our hearts, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Kyrios, who rules in all the authority of God. In his presence, the world cannot be the same.

⁴ Luke 2: 34 – 35