

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 26th April 2020

Luke 24: 13 - 25

Where were they going, these two disciples? Were they just going to Emmaus; why? Galilee lies in the opposite direction. Where were these two Galilean disciples going?

The village of Emmaus has been identified as the village of Abu Ghosh, which today lies a few miles west of Jerusalem on the main road that leads down from the Jerusalem hills to the flat plain where Tel Aviv, Israel's capital, now sits. If you have been visiting Jerusalem, on your way to Ben Gurion airport to catch your flight home you'll pass Abu Ghosh on your right, a muddle of houses and restaurants scattered across the hillside beyond a dry ravine.

A community of Benedictine monks and nuns live there, in a monastery built by the Crusaders 900 years ago; a silent, spiritual place where the monks and nuns chant their vespers in the early evening surrounded amidst a cloud of incense in a cool chapel.

Telephone in advance, and the monks and nuns will let you join them for vespers. Telephone too one of Abu Ghosh's famous restaurants, and book a table for afterwards. Telephone a friend who hasn't been before; invite her or him to join you. Watch the Spirit breeze through their life, wafted in on the balmy evening air, by the chants, the incense; the hovering holiness settling in to their soul, as they enjoy their traditional meal on a fairy light dappled terrace looking up the valley to the shadows of Jerusalem on the hills above.

Those two disciples weren't doing any of that though. There was no monastery at Emmaus in their day. They weren't heading to Tel Aviv, founded in 1909, or the airport, founded in 1936. And, they were going the wrong way if they were intending to return home to Galilee. So, where were they going?

I like to imagine that they were going to the beach. That's another reason to take that road from hot, high, dusty Jerusalem down to the plain and the coast. After all, they and their friends who had together followed the one that they hoped would save Israel, had given up. Thomas had wandered off. Some had stayed inside behind locked doors. Peter had gone home to Galilee, back to his old job. Everyone had given up, even though some had seen a vision of angels and an empty tomb. Finding themselves at something of a loose end, these two decided to go to the beach.

They told a stranger that the one whom they hoped would redeem Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, had turned out to be no saviour at all. What to do? Lock yourself away, run off, go home, take a holiday and get away from it all. What do you do when salvation is an empty hope?

There are a number of biblical scholars who understand Jesus' ministry of salvation as a task of recontextualising the Law of Moses, the ten Commandments and so on. For them, the Law of Moses was all about establishing a way by which village communities could function socially: worship the same God; honour your parents; don't steal from each other, or envy each other; respect life and marriage. Take a day off, the same day as everyone else.

This Mosaic Law was under pressure though in Jesus' day because these village communities were occupied by an empire, Rome.

Under occupation three things happen: people's social bonds become stronger as they face a common enemy; they demand a saviour, a messiah, a knight in shining armour to free them from occupation; thirdly, as much as their social bonds strengthen, they also, in crucial ways,

start to fray: people collaborate with occupier; those in authority do the occupier's bidding; people in communities start to inform on each other, judge each other, and meet out brutal punishment to anyone who doesn't toe-the-line of, on the one hand, the defenders of the occupation, or, on the other hand, the resistance to the occupation. The saviour that people hoped Jesus would be, was a saviour who would end the occupation and repair people's social bonds.

Today, in our situation at the moment, there are those who marvel that our society hasn't crumbled as it does in some dystopian stories. In dystopian novels such as Cormac McCarthy's book, and subsequent film, *The Road*, writers imagine that societal collapse leads to people fighting and cannibalising each other. However, it turns out, in our situation, far from fighting each other, we seem more likely to help each other. Dystopia isn't all that it was imagined to be.

However, it strikes me that what we are experiencing is not a dystopia, an end of days time, but something that is more like an occupation. We are being occupied by Covid-19. It rules the roost, makes the laws, decides when we can go out, where we can go. Under occupation people suffer and die, at random. In general, people close ranks against a common enemy. They long for a saviour to set them free. They start to inform on each other, to collaborate.

That has happened to us. We have strengthened our social networks against the virus. We long for a vaccine to save us. As many people as clap the NHS, take the opportunity to phone the police to snitch on their neighbours' second walk of the day.

Under the pressure of occupation, Jesus' ministry recontextualised the way people built their social relationships. He encouraged people to see that social bonds shouldn't be formed by hatred of a common enemy, but by love for each other. He redefined what a saviour was; not a knight in shining armour, but a faith that through sacrifice and service the evils of occupation could be overcome. He placed mercy not judgement at the heart of people's attitudes to those who collaborate with the occupier or the resistance movement.

Where were they going those two disciples; wandering off like the others, despondent, without purpose, lost? Were they going home? Were they going back to their old jobs? Were they running away from the Jerusalem authorities? Were they getting away from it all, going to the beach?

When Jesus found them, they were so lost they couldn't recognise him – they couldn't see salvation even when it walked beside them. But when he broke bread with them, reminding them of that meal at which they talked about love, and he washed their feet, and was merciful to the collaborator who would betray him; their eyes were opened. And Jesus disappeared. They didn't need him in the flesh anymore; their hearts burned with his presence.

Where are we going today? Is our commitment to stand together to fight Covid-19 born out of fear of a common enemy, or love for each other? Where are we going today? Will the salvation of a vaccine come, and if it does what will it save us from? This crisis perhaps, but not climate change, for example; there will be other crises. Where are we going today? 95% of people in Scotland supports the lockdown the Times reported last weekend, yet there are those who would twitch their curtains, judge, and condemn the mistakes a few have made under pressure, or out of foolishness.

Salvation is walking with us on this journey through life; we just need to recognise it. It won't come on a white horse in shining armour. It will come when we put our faith in our belief that

despite the distances between us, as a family, a church, a local community, a country, a nation, a world we need to break bread together in love; serve one another in sacrifice; judge each other with mercy.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.