

Reflection for 19th April (Easter 3)

The story of the risen Christ appearing to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus must be one of the best-loved passages in the Gospels. Perhaps this is because we can so easily identify with the feelings of the two disciples as they walk along: their puzzled bewilderment at the events which had taken place, and their struggle to make sense of it all as they talk to the mysterious stranger who walks alongside them. It is a powerful story – one which captures our imagination and can almost make us feel as though we were there ourselves. This is especially true of the homely touch towards the end of the story, where the two disciples invite Jesus into their home to share a meal with them.

That last element of the story was the inspiration for one of the best-known Victorian hymns, "Abide with me", written by Henry Francis Lyte in 1847 shortly before his death. His opening line, "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide" is based on the words of the two disciples to Jesus in the Emmaus road story. The hymn is very much one which is concerned with the approach of death, as indeed its author was suffering from terminal illness when he wrote it, and it is very much concerned with the individual Christian. Yet the story itself has a wider perspective than this.

Shared meals occupied an important place in Jesus' ministry: in line with the Jewish traditions of his time, they represented reconciliation and acceptance, and were frequently used by Jesus to demonstrate his fellowship with social outcasts, which so scandalised the religious establishment.

It was just such a meal that Jesus shared with the twelve disciples for the last time on the night that he was betrayed, and established a pattern which Christians have followed ever since. The good news which the two disciples rushed back to Jerusalem to share with their friends was not that they had been granted some special privilege by meeting the risen Christ: it was that God's raising of Christ meant salvation for the whole world.

The heart of the Emmaus road story is not only about the individual assurance of God's presence, as identified by Henry Francis Lyte in his hymn about the approach of death. It is also about the significance of Christ's resurrection for the whole of creation. It speaks of the transforming power of God, even to the extent of bringing life out of death, and tells us that through this one event the world has become a different place.

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