

## Life Understood Backwards: Luke 24:13–35

### **Looking Back**

The philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard claimed that “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

The experience of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus was something like this. How could they understand Jesus’ life? Even at the end did it make sense? Cleopas and the other, unnamed disciple have not understood Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection. We do not know how much time they spent with Jesus—it is clear they are not among the eleven disciples. But they certainly knew enough to be disappointed. He was not the deliverer they had hoped for. They, like many, wanted a Messiah who was a military redeemer. A messiah like David in every sense. An anointed leader who would defeat the occupying Romans just as David had tackled Goliath and the Philistines.

The one they had begun to think might be God’s anointed ruler had died shamefully on a cross. A remarkable man in many ways, but in the end as frail as any other. And now the women claimed his body was gone. More than that, they also said they had seen angels announcing that he was alive.

These events lived forwards made no sense to these two followers. A man who taught with authority, healed the sick, and cast out demons. A man welcomed into Jerusalem like a king. And then it all turned sour. These two disciples had apparently given up on the one they had been following. They had left Jerusalem for Emmaus and presumably were returning to their old lives.

But they encounter the risen Jesus, although they do not know this at first. This meeting is a revelation—a revealing in two stages. They experience a progressive understanding of who Jesus is. They will understand Jesus’ life.

First Jesus makes them look back as they journey together. They simultaneously look back on the life of Jesus and the work of God in the Old Testament. The Risen Jesus does the most remarkable thing. He combines his story with the story of the Hebrew Scriptures. Read through Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures become the First Testament to his life, his death, and his resurrection. These Scriptures are a testimony to Jesus. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Hebrew scriptures.

The second stage is a more personal encounter that goes beyond explanation. It is an opening of their eyes. They literally see the risen Christ. They had started out lost on the road, but now were found. They had been blind but now they could see.

### **Our Conversion**

We will not have had the same encounter with the risen Christ as the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. But there is likely to be some similarity. I remember at the age of seventeen finding out more about Jesus and the Bible. I had seen lots of the bits and pieces of the gospel but struggled to put it all together. I still needed my eyes to be opened. I can remember two distinct moments when Jesus suddenly made more sense. The first was a bit like the two disciples on the road having things explained to them. My Emmaus road was in a tent, in Margate, where the crucifixion was explained in rather graphic detail to me, and several hundred others. This converted my brain and my conscience. I went forward knowing that my life was never going to be the same again.

Just a few days later I had the second step of eye opening—only possible because of the first. I was reading the *Parable of the Tenants* in Mark 12 and my heart was converted. My heart burned at that moment like the experience of those two disciples. I understood at a heart level just what it meant that God had sent prophets to speak of him. Prophets who were beaten and killed. I understood at the heart level that he sent his own son that we might know him. Only for him to suffer the same fate. It was as though Jesus was there unpacking the Law and the

Prophets—refreshing me as the bread of life with a meal. And of course, he was there by his Spirit.

Knowing Jesus in this way does not mean that the rest of our lives suddenly make complete sense. But it is a start. Much still happens in my life that I do not understand. Things have happened to me and my family which I wish had not. But in Christ I trust that in the end it will make sense. The times of pain and trial will be found to have some benefit or important consequence. If we have met Jesus on our road to Emmaus we can find him too in the Valley of the Shadow of death. The poet B M Franklin puts it this way:

My life is but a weaving  
Between my Lord and me; I  
cannot choose the colors  
He worketh steadily.

Oft times He weaveth sorrow  
And I, in foolish pride,  
Forget He sees the upper, And  
I the under side.

Not til the loom is silent  
And the shuttles cease to fly,  
Shall God unroll the canvas  
And explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful  
In the Weaver's skillful hand, As  
the threads of gold and silver In  
the pattern He has planned.

### ***Our Ongoing Experience of Christ***

In the Emmaus story the two disciples do something simple. They have a meal with Jesus—they break bread with him. It is no surprise that it was at the breaking of bread that their eyes were opened, and they recognized that the man before them is the risen Lord Jesus. Less than a week earlier Jesus has broken bread and explained that his body must be broken. These two disciples would surely have heard about this.

Almighty God does not fix his broken creation and broken relationships with a display of power and might. He does the unthinkable—Jesus lays down his life for his friends. One of the most frustrating things about our distance from one another because of Covid-19 is the fact that we cannot gather, and worse still that we cannot eat bread and drink wine, and remember Christ together. As the body of Christ, we are meant to meet together.

In our distance from each other let's be reminded of the privilege of meeting together so that we can make the best of that day when we join one another again. Let's remember that puzzle that we are in a mysterious sense the body of Christ.

Scattered we might be, but we are still united in Christ.

### ***A Call to Passion for Christ***

The two disciples have their hearts kindled by Jesus. A mixture of joy that he was not dead and a revelation of what he had accomplished in the twin events of cross and resurrection.

How can we kindle that flame afresh—that same passion and conviction in Christ that we have tasted before? There are obvious answers of course, such as prayer and Bible reading. But in the spirit of the gospel and to keep the light alive in us reaching out to our fellow disciples is vital. As members of his body our concern should be with the health of all.

Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full. Circumstances prevent us meeting to celebrate together. This does not mean we retreat and just wait. A crisis like this, it tests our depth in Christ. Being united and encouraged in Christ can be as simple as a phone call, a text message, a card, or a good old-fashioned letter. Some of us might be called to heroics if

we are on the frontline but for many of us we need to do the small things that show love and concern. George Eliot expresses it well in her novel *Middlemarch*:

“..for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Many of the blessings we can bring to one another, even at this time, are unremarkable. But these things do not only achieve good now they echo in eternity as the lives of disciples of Jesus well lived. A crisis is just the time when we need some gospel purpose when we need to show love, kindness, and generosity. Encouraging one another, listening to one another, taking time to do something for one another is part of living the gospel—the re-creation of proper relationships in Christ Jesus.

It is not just our fellow Christians that need encouragement. In these odd times all sorts of questions are in people’s minds. Many people are asking questions about life and death, not so different to those asked by Cleopas and his friend.

Our lives do not make much sense lived forward. How much more is this the case for those who do not know Christ. There are likely to be people you know who are lonely. If nothing else, you can remedy this for a few minutes. There are almost certainly people you know who are fearful. Well you can listen. There are very likely people you know who are asking questions. Your effort to reach out to them might be the only answer they get.

We believe in the priesthood of all believers we can all use this time to connect with others.

### ***Loving One Another Makes Sense***

The act of reaching out to someone is a small step in making sense of life. The strengthening of relationships is a natural consequence of the gospel. Simple acts of love will strengthen both parties and strengthen the body, the fellowship of believers.

The one certainty of understanding our lives is that where there is love this is where they most readily make sense.

The ‘Corona test’ asks of us all how much we love. If we have not love we are, as Paul says, a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. Love sings a better song. Don’t wait for someone else to connect.

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew’s gospel which tells us how our lives will make sense in the end when we meet him face-to-face:

<sup>34</sup> “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

<sup>37</sup> “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

<sup>40</sup> “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

**Matthew 25:34–40, NIV**

**Mark Whiting**