

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. Luke 24.33.

Last week on Easter Day, I pointed out to you a little known story in the OT of King David lamenting for his dead baby son (2 *Sam* 12). Now I want us to look at one of the most loved stories in the NT, the journey of the two to Emmaus on that first Easter Day. This gospel episode has spoken to countless millions over the centuries, as it assures us that the risen Lord Jesus is walking beside us in our deepest distress even when we do not know it. It is light in darkness.

Can we try to look at this possibly too familiar story with fresh eyes? Two people leave Jerusalem on Easter Day to go home. Their beloved Jesus has been executed, and these two are in despair. If you look on p1061, *Lk* 24.21, they say some of the saddest words in the Bible: 'but we *had* hoped that [Jesus] was the one who would redeem Israel'. We *had* hoped. These two are seriously depressed. They have lost all hope. It's all over. They're running away from Jerusalem back home.

We know that one of them is called Cleopas, v18... It's *possible* that the other one was his wife. We know from *John* 19.25 that there was a *Clopas* with a wife called Mary. Possibly Cleopas is Clopas. Who knows? But I think that the other sad traveller is unnamed because it could well be me! It could be *you* in your own sorrow, going back home having lost everything. Jesus the living Saviour can come beside even you in your darkness though you do not recognise him.

Cleopas and AN Other are clearly defeated individuals. You may very well know what it is like to feel defeated. But I think it speaks also of our *society* and even of the Church.

Certainly our British society seems defeated. We don't seem to believe in anything any more. We don't believe in our Britishness. We are ashamed of our culture and history. We allow ourselves to be ruled by the most ridiculous health and safety regulations, by PC. We have given up the fight against drugs. 'There's nothing we can do. Why criminalise it?' People have been murdering since Cain murdered Abel. Just because we can't stop it, do we just give up imprisoning murderers then? We seem to abase ourselves before terrorism. Why are we on this massive guilt-trip? Why the defeatism?

And the Church in these islands seems pretty defeatist also. Church attendance statistics are always gloomy. It's down, down, down, year upon year. We are like the Emmaus two with their 'We *had* hoped'. But now it's just managing inevitable decline. Apparently there is new EU legislation coming that will force faith-schools, in the name of equality, to accept atheists, and ministers to marry same-sex couples. And, do you know, we will accept it in our usual defeatist way. You see, I'm even defeatist about people being defeatist!

So many of our clergy and church leaders have given up the fight for biblical truth. They've let the Enlightenment secularists defeat them. 'Jesus walking on the water? Rising from the dead? Jesus the Son of God? Surely not! OK. We'll give all that up, just so that you won't sneer at us'.

Did you read a recent fascinating article by AN Wilson about how he lost his Christian faith and found it again. Whatever you think of Wilson, you cannot accuse him of being thick. He learned Russian just to write the life of Tolstoy.

He said that the reason he lost his faith was that everyone around him, especially the clever-clogs in politics, the media, the universities, - all the people he at one time admired - sneered at it. Now, he says, he has, with age, the confidence not to mind what they think. So let's not give in to the dominant culture around us. It's not that great anyway. Among all the many good things ours is a culture which celebrates Jade Goody, encourages the greed and debt which has caused the recession, aborts thousands of babies every year, and would dearly love to legalise euthanasia. This secular culture which dares to look down on Christianity as ridiculous, has little shame. Our politicians are debased. The idea of truth and the corresponding notion of trust are rapidly being lost. I could go on. Stand up as Christians, and don't feel that we have to justify ourselves to secularism.

The Emmaus two were defeated. 'We *had* hoped', they said, 'that Jesus would be the one to restore Israel'. Then the unknown Jesus gave them a Bible study. Look at v27... He went right back to Moses, through *all* the prophets. The Emmaus two were depressed because basically they didn't know their Bibles. Like most of us, they knew bits. I spend most of my time telling people what the Bible *really* says. People either ridicule it without having read *all* of it, or they become upset, like Cleopas, because they don't know it. The point Jesus is making is that, *had* they read the *whole* OT, they would have realised that Jesus's execution was not an accident, but part of God's mysterious plan of redemption. So, get into God's Word, *all* of it. Read it every day.

Now, go back to v22... *Women* reported the empty tomb and the angels. But in v24 their *companions*, men no doubt, saw nothing. The Emmaus two preferred to listen to their men companions than to the women. Women were despised. Why listen to their hysterical nonsense? But actually, the women were right! Who are we listening to in *our* society? The high-ups, the smart people? Or the marginalised? This was AN Wilson's point. He listened for too long to those whom society honoured, and they misled him. Had Cleopas listened to the women and not to their companions, the two of them would not have been so downcast. Who are you listening to?

In v28 they approach the village, but it's getting late. Out of kindness they ask the stranger to come in for a meal. He would have gone further, not pushing himself on to him, v28... Islam works by fear, control, power. The Lord Jesus waits to be invited. He forces himself on no-one. And it is at that meal that he reveals himself as the risen Lord Jesus, vv29-32... Jesus came to them; they did not seek him. I have a dear friend, very clever. I don't pray for her to find God, but that God will find her. Christ comes looking for us.

And when Cleopas and his friend realise who it is, they are transformed. No longer depressed; no longer defeated and without hope, and running away from Jerusalem, they got up *immediately* and, despite the late hour and the danger, went back to Jerusalem. That is *our* job now, if we really believe in the living Lord Jesus. We need to get back in there, back into our fractured, endangered society to bring the people hope in Christ. Let's just quietly be salt and light.