

Preaching after Emmaus Losing your voice to find another

Welcome to Westminster Abbey, but don't get comfortable we are off to Emmaus.

Emmaus

And, of course, going to Emmaus you are going the wrong way. We are supposed to notice, before the story has even really begun, that we have lost all sense of direction. This is wrong; it is widdershins. These two disciples are really not supposed to be on the road to Emmaus.

Luke, tells this story. And Luke expects us to notice that they were going the wrong way. He has spent time getting that idea fixed in our heads. Luke writes the only gospel that begins and ends in Jerusalem. He is forever directing our attention to Jerusalem. Jesus has 'set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51). When the gospel ends, whilst John and Matthew rush us off to meet the Risen Christ in Galilee, the furthest Luke gets from the empty tomb, is this journey down the Emmaus road. Because all roads, lead to Jerusalem and the cross.

Luke is really interested in roads.

SLIDE 1 (Roger Wagner – unusual – emphasis on the road)

He is the one who tells us about a good Samaritan and the Jericho road. He reminds us that the Son of Man and the disciples lived on the road (Luke 9:57; 10:4). He has Moses and Elijah endorse Jesus' sense of direction on the Mount of Transfiguration, 'They appeared in glory and were speaking of his *departure*, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' (in Greek it is an *exodus* Luke 9:31). Later, in Acts, Luke gives us about the road from Jerusalem to Gaza where the apostle Philip makes a startling convert. So, thanks to Luke, we think of roads as places of danger and courage. But above all roads are places of commitment. It is the opposite of footloose Mr Toad "Travel. Scene. Excitement'. Roads, are where you choose - going on, or turning back. Luke's gospel works things out as we go from this place to that place and at *this* time. It is a story *in progress*.

Clinging to a certainty

So, on the Emmaus road, two men are stepping out of the story. They are talking, actually they are getting the story straight

 talking with each other about all these things that had happened (Luke 24:14)

They might be disappointed and disillusioned, but they were not going to be *uncertain*. They set out the facts, and they shut out the possibility of any other explanation.

Jesus joins them and asks what they are talking about. It was not a confrontation notice, he had come from Jerusalem, caught them up. They are baffled by that – surely he must know what has happened. There is some fine story telling now as they tell him *exactly* what happened and *exactly* how it must be explained.

 The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

It is the gospel without Easter. A story stripped of hope. And a steady determination that there is only one way of looking at this. You may remember Blackadder and the incomparable General Melchett, who insists on a lunatic optimism

If nothing else works, a total *pig-headed* unwillingness to look *facts* in the face will see us through

This is worse. This is the counsel of despair.

And, let's pause there, before we think about Jesus answers. There are some points worth noting.

So, How do you preach on the Emmaus Road?

SLIDE 2 Thomas Denny widow One of our problems in preaching, is the *Blue Peter syndrome*: here is one I prepared earlier

Sunday congregations arrive harassed because they lost the car keys and then couldn't find somewhere to park or worried about their job, or happy and in love and they get something we wrote on Wednesday, after a difficult email from the Archdeacon or just after the cat was sick. It is always something we prepared earlier. George Herbert always wanted us to have something for *him* and for *her*, but we get in our own heads. I once got sat next to a man at a lunch who wanted to put me right – this happens to me a lot, I can't imagine why. He wanted to know why clergy never learnt from the army. They always start a radio conversation with – 'Are you receiving me?'

That is the first lesson of the Emmaus Road. We are not Deliveroo. We should not rush in and rush out with something rather like an essay. You have to walk with them, even if they are going the wrong way. Sermons are a kind of conversation, not a special delivery. Walk with them.

The second point is about content. They were downcast they thought Jesus was dead. You would think, wouldn't you, that Jesus would reveal himself – as he did for Mary Magdalene. No. He it was teaching, not testimony. Setting the story straight. Mark Oakley is up in a few minutes. In his *Collage of God*, he uses a quotation from McEwan's *Enduring Love* two characters trying to get their heads around a story

Grinding the jagged edge of memories' hammering the unspeakable into forms of words, treading single perceptions into narratives

Preaching is teaching, wrestling with the difficulty. We are not delivering visions, we are helping people understand.

The third point is about message. I asked my critic in chief what I should say if I am giving advice about sermons. They should be about Love and Hope she said. Love Hope and perhaps amazement. That is what they heard on the Emmaus Road. It should be *good* news.

Preaching as walking with not delivering, preaching that asks 'Are you receiving me?' Preaching with content, the whole truth, the slow truth and above all, preaching love and hope. Let's go back to

What Jesus actually said

The whole truth. Those two disciples had one story – a gospel and no Easter.

SLIDE 3 Actually an image of the evangelist Matthew but one vocation for another They had rehearsed that story. Jesus had another account of the same events

Oh, how foolish you are... Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures Luke 24:25-27

They have the story wrong.

Their story could not accommodate pain and death. Jesus notice insists that the truth is both suffering and glory. Both. And.

It was Moses and the prophets. What does it mean? Luke does not spell that out, but we know he said something about suffering and glory. The prophets knew both. To talk about the prophets is to talk of lament and transformation.

Lament. The prophets challenged that wild-eyed optimism that so plagues our national discourse. Things are not fine, world beating and wonderful and they are not necessarily getting better. You probably know what Walter Brueggemann has to say about Jeremiah chapter eight – 'Is there no balm in Gilead',

It is crying time. It is death time... Now it is time not for answers but for questions that defy answers...ⁱ

SLIDE 4 Duccio the disciples who want more

We get a rictus smile behind a podium always wanting to accent-u-ate the positive. We have forgotten that there is a proper register of public grief. That is what the prophets provide. Zephaniah - challenging us to enter the crisis more deeply, consider it coldly, think it might the possibility that this might be every bit as serious as it seems.

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation Zephaniah 1:15

The prophets rail against the idea that human agency will always rescue us. Calls out our godless pride. What Zephaniah offers is a judgement. *That* prophecy follows from *this* behaviour. Jerusalem, says Zephaniah 'has listened to no voice'

It has not trusted in the LORD; it has not drawn near to its God. The officials within it are roaring lions; its judges are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning... Zephaniah 3:2

So the city will hear 'no voice'. The problem is not that the faithful have their fingers in their ears, the problem is that they listen to something else. What they hear, what they choose to hear, is the steady insistence that all shall be well because power must be trusted. This is the big idea. Prophecy is not despair, it is a *counter-narrative*. That is precisely what Jesus had to get across on the Emmaus Road, the idea that any worthwhile story about our world, and our place within it, must embrace the reality of pain and loss. It is the thing the

two disciples could not do. It is the thing we keep failing to do adequately as we hurry on to be super and successful and altogether lovely. We have to be able to talk about tough stuff.

That is *half* the message of the prophets. The other half is the possibility of amazement. Not just recovery, but transformation. Prophets write about despair and offer an alternative. Again it is a failing of the church that we struggle to describe glory. There is a lovely passage in Margaret Spufford's *Celebration* **SLIDE 5**

Even painters cannot, with the possible exception of Fra Angelico, paint Heaven. Hell, or the fear of it, comes more easily off the brush. ... my husband and I were standing in front of a magnificent Flemish Last Judgement that had ended up in Danzig. The souls to our Lord's left in their descent to damnation were vivid enough: but the blessed to his right were curiously inert, smug at best. Our guide said suddenly, "It's odd, isn't it, how the blessed always look as if they have been stuffed?"ⁱⁱ

We have got hung up on vague promises and on concepts like justice. The prophets suffered from no such restraint. They imagine what was lost being restored, a city rebuilt a wilderness made into a garden. A physical, real transformation.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, Isaiah 43:18-20

I think it might be the abiding weakness of our culture and our church that we have lost the prophetic imagination to speak out of *this* mess and muddle of *that* hope and that promise. We really need a language that knows where we have been and where we might get. If we are ever to tackle legacy issues, or overcome isolation and division we have to hear the dispossessed and be honest about injustice. We have to acknowledge the sheer improbability of the idea that we might, with a little effort, be different and better than we are. Then, to hope as we must, we must accept that we need to be rescued.

And *that* is what they learned on the Emmaus Road.

Preaching After Emmaus

I called 'Preaching After Emmaus'. Most of what you have heard was about being able to talk frankly, honestly about despair and hope. That is part of it. I don't think we do that well. More importantly I think what happened to them has to happen to us. I think we have to lose a story and learn one, Lose our voice and find it. The Emmaus story often gets told as it is all about the Eucharistic moment – recognition.

SLIDE 6 But the key point is that they were going wrong and got put right. They went back to Jerusalem. They set out in despair full of their loss. They return as witnesses, to Jesus Christ.

So much of what we say is about us, how we are feeling, what we encounter in a reading. I am arguing that the sheer strangeness of scripture, the awkwardness of history ought to trip

us up week after week. This is not our story. Never our story. We have to lose our voices to find the words God will give us. We have to read to be amazed, startled converted, turned round, sent back the other way. All our strategies put *us* in charge, our vision, our priorities. We have to know that we can be wrong. We have to lose a voice to find it. That is the great lesson surely in preaching. To be turned round on the road over and again, put straight by mercy and grace, surprised by history and text.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis 2001) pp.50-51

ⁱⁱ Margaret Spufford, 1989 *Celebration*, London Mowbray pp.21-22. Margaret Spufford was the mother of Francis Spufford and you will come across references to the story she tells in some of his books.