

Medicine of the Person, July 2009

Bible Study Luke 24:13-35, Wednesday 22nd July 2009

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When I read Tom Fryer's 'Winter Letter' I discovered that Philip Lernould used the same verses for his Bible Study at last years European meeting in the Netherlands. My initial thought was 'Oh No!', quickly followed by a sense of peace, and amazement at the richness of God's Word. The same passage can, of course, speak to us in new ways at different times, because the Bible is the living Word of God.

So let us consider the passage, Luke 24:13-35, in the light of non-verbal communication. I have used the New International Version of the Bible as the basis for this study.

The scene is set at the beginning of the passage in v13 'That same day' – the day of resurrection, when the women met the angel at the empty tomb and were told Jesus had risen. The disciples on the road to Emmaus were in full possession of these facts, which must have spread quickly through the group of Jesus' followers. We know from Johns Gospel that Cleopas or Clopas' wife, Mary, was one of the women at the foot of the cross (John 21:26), so this faithful couple were likely to have been with the other disciples when the news of the resurrection was brought. Perhaps now they are returning home

together. Artists who have depicted this scene show the travelers as two men, but there is no foundation for this from the Gospel account. We don't know the gender or identity of the companion.

As they walked they talked and discussed (v15), some versions say 'disputed'. They were making positive efforts to interpret the events, talking and debating. They were not afraid to continue their conversation when joined by the 'stranger', although these were dangerous times, their leader had just been killed. Did Jesus, in His approach, give them signals that He was not a threat? It was not dark, as it was only dusk when they arrived at Emmaus, so they could see Him, but He may have remained at a slight distance from them. Perhaps He gave a greeting, it is not recorded. He joined their group effortlessly, without invitation.

Non-threatening body language is very important in Non verbal communication. From the passage we cannot tell in which direction Jesus was traveling, but it seems likely He came from behind them. This could be very threatening. How many of us have been alarmed and worried that we are being followed with evil intentions if someone is 'hot on our heels', getting too close, or deliberately moving faster than us? Somehow Jesus communicated His peace as He approached these people, whose confidence in the legal and religious systems was in shreds. BUT they did not recognise Him.

We can get alongside others by communicating our attitudes and intentions in positive behaviour. Eye contact, head nods, glances, smiles and bodily stance all give positive signals. How physically close do we get to people? This is partly a cultural thing. I had an amusing experience in a shop in Helsinki in Finland. I wanted to ask the shop assistant a question, and positioned myself in front of her. Before I could speak she put her hand on my shoulder and gently pushed me back a few inches. She explained that, in Finland, personal space is large and I was invading hers and making her feel uncomfortable. I thought ruefully that she would not like to travel by tube train in London, but learned a lot from that experience. We need to reflect on the signals we give others. Are we accessible or invasive? Approachable or intimidating? I recently heard it said that 55% of communication is body language. 38% is conveyed by tone of voice, and only 7% by the words we actually use.

There are verbal exchanges in v17-24. Cleopas gave a clear, succinct account of previous events. His demeanour conveyed depression and dejection. He did not give eye contact, he stopped walking and the second half of verse 17 conveys a feeling of spent energy. To continue to walk and also speak was physically beyond Cleopas in his state of emotional collapse. Perhaps his voice was muted and Jesus had to strain to hear him, standing close to catch the words?

What a wake up call in verse 25!! The stranger did not mince His words, calling Cleopas and his companion 'foolish'! But they were

not offended. Like others before them, they were spellbound by Jesus' teaching, walking alongside and listening to His clear account of prophecy fulfilled. BUT they did not recognise Him.

At the beginning of this story Jesus did not ask permission to join them as they walked. But in v28, when they reached Emmaus, He made as if to go on further, leaving them. He did not say anything; again, it was in his bodily movement that they understood this. There is a parallel here with many on the religious road, who constantly discuss and debate the things of faith, but although walking in the company of God never actually invite Him to touch them. There are many who think and pray and read religious books, or the Bible, but do not take that final step of asking for more than a distant acquaintance. When invited, Jesus went into the Inn with them. He turned aside from the path, and stayed with them. It reminds me of the artist Holman Hunt's picture depicting Jesus as the light of the world (Rev 3:20), standing at the heart's door, knocking, offering Himself, but still outside. Cleopas and his companion made a great leap when they invited Jesus to enter the Inn with them. They urged Him strongly - he had captivated and encouraged them on the road. Previously, because of his depressed mental state, Cleopas was unable to speak strongly when he gave his account of previous events, but now they had been inspired, found a purpose, talked with someone who had revitalized them. BUT they did not recognise Him.

The key moment of the story is in v30. Jesus 'took' bread, blessed, 'broke' and 'gave' (distributed) it. These same verbs are used at the Last Supper (Luke 22:19). We do not know if Cleopas and his companion were present at the Last Supper, or at any of the previous feeding miracles. But here we have a classic recognition scene, a change from ignorance to knowledge arising from actions alone, the 'ANAGNORISIS' (Greek). Meals are an occasion for rituals in most cultures, and ancient religious ceremonies usually involved food that had been offered to the God. When it was eaten, divine strength was thought to be conferred on the worshipper. Jesus referred to Himself as the 'Bread of Life' (John 6:48), which to the Jews meant divine Manna from heaven. They understood Manna to be heavenly food which fulfilled the needs of the individual who ate it. It was not generic food, but something that answered to and met the unique condition of the recipient. His statement, 'I am the Bread of Life', and His words 'this is my body' at the Last Supper, clearly identify Jesus as the Messiah. In these statements, and in His actions on the road to Emmaus, He is claiming that He will satisfy any need. To fully partake of Jesus, we must take Him into our inmost being.

The first meal described in the Bible, in Genesis 1, when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, brought decay and death. The first meal in the new, post-resurrection creation shows the defeat of death. It brought together head and heart in understanding and excited application. In both Genesis 1 and this story the words 'their eyes

were opened' are used, but with what different meanings! A tyrant can keep people subjugated by fear of death. Jesus broke the power of death and brings hope, so the tyrant has lost his power, as clearly demonstrated by the boldness of the Christians in the Acts of the Apostles.

The pinnacle of the story is Jesus' non-verbal action. When Cleopas analyses it he states their 'hearts burned' on the road, and we have already described the changes that had come over them from dejection and depression to interest and engagement during the walk with Jesus. Following this amazing event they had the energy to return the 7 miles to Jerusalem, in the dark, to tell the others. But without the healing revelation of Jesus, nothing would have changed. Now, they recognised Him.

This should be our experience. Here we are, a group of Christians from different countries, cultures and theologies. On the finer points of our faith we will be bound to hold different positions and attitudes. The one act that can draw us together is the Eucharist, the Agape, the love meal. Like many of you, I have shared Communion in other parts of the world, where the common language was in the action and the event, because the words were incomprehensible. The training I am presently undertaking is ecumenical, with students drawn from the Anglican, United Reformed and Methodist Churches. We spend weekends together every few weeks, and will join in a

shared communion, celebrated in the tradition of the Celebrant. This is always a unifying event, experiencing and valuing difference. In the spring as part of the same course I spent some time in a Church far from my own tradition, one of the Elim Pentecostal Churches. Their celebration of communion is very informal and understated, but there was a tremendous sense of sharing, and compassion for one another as the sacrifice Jesus made was remembered. This sense of unity is powerful and amazing. There are some Christian groups who do not partake in the Eucharist, or who exclude those who do not fully concur with their particular statements of faith. I am in no way inferring that we cannot have a deep and fruitful relationship with such groups. But perhaps not being able to share this ultimate act of obedience does prevent us from that understanding that is beyond words.

However the communion is carried out, and wherever in the world, both its simplicity and unfathomable depth tell us again of the affirming presence of God. The Sacrament of Communion is not to be partaken of lightly, it contains deep spiritual truths, but in my view was meant by Jesus to be an act of inclusion and welcome. He did not say to the disciples on the Emmaus road, "You did not understand, you have not expressed the depth of belief I demand, go and study more to become acceptable". Rather, He took the bread, blessed, broke and gave, implying a new start, and an ongoing intimate relationship with the Bread of Life.

The use of simple elements, bread and wine, in the context of God's mighty work in Christ, confronts us with God Himself. The Eucharistic journey on the road to Emmaus showed Cleopas and the other disciple the other Jesus, the one who would accompany them long term. It challenges us to extend our sights to the God who is beyond and other than us.

So in summary; we have looked at the pain of loss and separation and the physical and psychological effects this has. We have contemplated how Jesus came alongside these grieving people in an accessible, non threatening way, and was listened to but not heard. He was invited in, and through His actions brought recognition, reassurance and hope, that recharged the energy reserves and led to a new purpose in life. May we strive to be accessible, and to show that same love and compassion to those trapped inside themselves. May we be a vehicle that is useful to God and an encouragement to others as we move forward along our life's road.

I will end with part of a short verse, often sung in English Churches.

'Thanks for the fellowship found at this meal, thanks for a day refreshed;

Thanks to the Lord for His presence we feel, thanks for the food He blessed.....

As He was known in the breaking of bread, now is He known again;
And by His hand have the hungry been fed, thanks be to Christ
AMEN

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