

Dr Philippe LERNOULD (F)

08/08/2008

Translation: John CLARK

The Emmaus Pilgrims

(Luke 24: 13-35)

Emmaus time – an ever present event

“What gain have the workers from their toil?

I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover, he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Ecclesiastes 3.9-11).

“Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3.13b-14).

Luke is writing an account of something that happened 2000 years ago. He is writing in the last pages of his first book addressed to “most excellent Theophilus”! This will later become a fragment of Christian memory, the gospel.

I would like us to take time to read once again, to consider and meditate on this text, in the present time. We find here a story that is always part of the present moment.

Two disciples are travelling to a village, called Emmaus. The two men could be ourselves. The pilgrimage is also ours.

Just like them, we are travelling along the path of life. We are conversing and discussing as we go. We speak together about these events and try to make sense of them. We are carried along by our undertaking. We go over the past and try to rebuild the world. How much time is spent on discussions, or meetings, that often prove sterile? On what basis do we qualify time as lost, gained or given?

Like the two men, we find ourselves wanting to leave places that bring back unhappy memories, places that recall failures. We have a common desire to travel, to meet new people and to visit new horizons. Is not our life a pilgrimage on this earth?

Does not this involve our whole culture, particularly its biblical aspect, our awareness of the theme of the journey, the pattern of thought as we travel, and the present time in our lives! All religions have pilgrimages. Our fathers travelled over the desert. We are always looking for the Promised Land. How many pilgrims regularly follow the path of St. James to Compostella! In John’s gospel, Christ is seen as the only road to the Father: “*I am the way, the truth and the life*” (John 14.6). It is Christ who makes the way known.

An unknown person joins the two men. Luke lets us know that this is Jesus in person. He seeks to take part in the conversation, a stranger, and apparently ignorant of what has happened in Jerusalem. He identifies himself with their concerns and asks: *“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”* (v.17).

The travellers speak of what has happened to Jesus of Nazareth, *“who was a prophet mighty in deed and word”* (v.19). He was their guide, their Master! They had followed him for three years throughout Judea and Galilee. Collapse of their messianic dreams, he has been condemned to death and crucified by the people who hold religious and political responsibility! What a plot, what jam packed mystery! *“Some women . . . some of those who were with us* (vv. 22, 24) have spoken about the empty tomb and the disappearance of the body.

Here was somebody who looked as though he wanted to come and help them or, at least, to go with them to the end of the trail! Now they had the opportunity to tell everything! They spoke of their bitterness and their resentment. They took a step back from their trouble. This backward pace, this return over the mental picture, allowed them to focus the object of their disarray: the empty tomb! Perhaps they might put themselves into a listening mode.

What, nevertheless, could one do in the light of such a failure? Our story sometimes rubs up against such terms of “non-sense”. Has not the death of someone close, or of a young child, for example, dragged us into the abyss of absurdity? Have we never had the experience of seeking in vain to explain the inexplicable, or to wish to exit from the absurdity of such a setback?

Have we not experienced, or known about, these times of confusion and revolt during a period of mourning? The experience of mourning is essentially personal and requires time to work through it. A listening ear can help us to do this. Some of us have had experience of this; others have met it professionally.

The questions, raised by Jesus, in this situation, lead onto the meaning of the event. *“What things?”* (v.19). Jesus and his disciples have lived through the same event but without the same understanding. Jesus, alone, knows the exact meaning! The travellers remained obsessed by a first degree reading of the event. What struck them was the apparent lack of sense. They are as though blinded to prevent their recognition of Jesus! But right, this latter is the clue to the situation!

The two disciples required the entire journey to pass from total non-sense to the complete sense that Jesus was revealing to lead them to faith! But, this is requiring a certain amount of explanations and time.

So, Jesus assumes the initiative. Outstanding therapist and teacher, he takes on his two travelling companions. He speaks to understanding and heart - to the true person in the biblical sense. He gives to them his own re-running of the events. He firmly takes these two “pilgrims” out of the view of the episode in which they were enclosed. He re-sites the events in the long history of Israel, theirs, his - ours. *“Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures”* (v.27).

The true weight of this discourse still seems to escape the two men. They have, without doubt, already heard all that, indeed, have already repeated similar things among themselves... at home, during an evening gathering, at the synagogue, in the footsteps of Jesus... Still they do not make the connection. Does such a rehearsing of the events give them a little of the meaning? Their downtrodden spirits still do not understand everything. Their heart, *“slow to believe”* are set alight. The conversation acts like a mysterious therapy. It provides a little more time and a mental trigger.

Do we not often complain of being taken over by events? Are we not carried along by worry about the things that we are doing so that we no longer know how to separate the mundane from the existential? How much time do we spend trying to see clearly into our hearts? Do we take time to listen to what others have said to us about the understanding of particular events? Are we attentive to significant messages from our circle? How do we appreciate the advice of people who come to be with us? Do we know how to read and re-read the Scriptures about the events in our lives? Do we take necessary and sufficient time to go more deeply into them in the light of experience from our communities or from the teaching of our Churches?

The disciples arrive at the end of their journey. The time has passed. *"It is almost evening and the day is now over"* (v.29). It is time for rest and a little recuperation. The night, the darkness, are they going to separate the two pilgrims from their travelling companion? Jesus does not wish to impose himself upon them, doubtless to allow them to express their freedom and to continue their journey. The disciples, rather, take the initiative to hold on to him. They invite him to share their meal. Life regains its course. They are discovering a beginning of meaning.

They have walked together for a length of time, *side by side*. They rediscover themselves indoors around a table, finally, *face to face*. Something is going to happen! Events are hurrying forward! They are going to share something other than words. Jesus follows the time when he taught by word and deed and blessing, by the breaking and the gift of bread. *"I am the bread of life"* (John 6.35).

Everything lights up and becomes crystal clear in a fraction . . . of seconds! They suddenly arrive at the full meaning of events that have just overturned their lives. To the light of the Scriptures, that place *the today of Christ in the history of his people*, is joined the light of the action of breaking the bread. *"I am the light of the world"* (John 8.12). The memory of a time of fellowship breaks in. *Connecting the past to this present moment*, the two men realize that they are affected personally: *"Their eyes were opened and they recognized him"* (v.31).

Their period of mourning is complete: the death of Jesus, and the disappearance of his body, are past events. The past is past! We are now in the present time. The presence of their Lord becomes real! They need time to grasp that this really is different from their expectation. From complete "non-sense", they have progressed to the fullness of faith. They have achieved for them the re-reading of Jesus.

Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone without recognizing them? Then suddenly through a gesture, or a comical expression, a fragrance, the remembrance of an event relocating the person, comes re-acquaintance (new knowledge) of the person. We all have experience of this type of meeting that is lit up through the flashing fire of a memory. The intimate personal meeting resumes its course as though it had never been interrupted. What alone counts is the present moment causing the past to enter into the present. Sometimes a unique meeting with a single person enlightens us for the rest of the journey, indeed for the whole duration of life!

The act of faith permits the disciples - permits us, us Christians - to know Jesus anew as alive, without seeing him. We adhere to his universal presence in every place and at every time. To hold him in memory, for the believer, makes him eternally present.

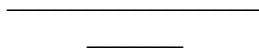
At the end of the episode, related by Luke, the disciples are aware of what for them had been a mad journey and also of the unexpected light brought by Christ himself. Their eyes - the eyes of their heart - are opened. The meaning of the Scriptures has been unveiled for them. The revelation of the true sense of the Word has irradiated their understanding. The presence of Christ sets their hearts alight.

In a single flourish, they decide to return to Jerusalem with the good news. The demands of time no longer exist! They are no longer engaged in discussion on the return journey. It is, rather, a matter of development! They are aware of nothing but the urgency of communicating their extraordinary experience. The thing that matters is *“to tell what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread”* (v.35).

Everything, including the route, has undergone a complete change of meaning. The Lord has disappeared, what does that matter as they know that he is alive! A complete satisfaction invades, and drives them on. They hurry, for one reason alone, to pass on their assurance to the others, to bear witness.

The new understanding of the disciples is confirmed by that of the Eleven. To separate it from any possibility of illusion, Luke tells us that it must also be that of the community. This is the basis of the authenticity of the witness through the centuries!

Therein lies the mystery of the Faith, of our faith! It is past history by definition, the testimony of the first witnesses, but it agrees with our present, personal and collective testimony. This happens through the passing on of a message received by our believing brothers, through the New Testament and the Tradition of our Churches, and by our quite personal experience.



Through this bible study, and in keeping with the theme of our week, I would like to underline the value, and the importance, that I attach to our times of encounter and development, to our times of teaching and discussion, times of listening and of speaking, but also the exchanges of glances and our times of sharing (time and ideas, testimony and experience, ordinary things and confidences, also meals and small gifts . . .).

You will also have understood that, for me, the time spent in the week of the Medicine of the Person is more a “gift” than a “constraint”. I have travelled with the group since 1968. I come back faithfully to travel together, to meet and to share with you. Is not this, a little of our time year by year, like an inexhaustible spring! I can say that each year I have come to understand in each one of you more of myself!

I thank you all, faithful longstanding companions and valued new ones.

Fredeshiem August 8th 2008.
Philippe LERNOULD.