



Ceri Richards – 'The Supper at Emmaus'. Note the responses of the disciples and their body language. 1957 Chapel of St Edmund Hall Oxford

Luke 24:13-35 The Walk to Emmaus Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in

these days?' He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, '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. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.' Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! 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. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Sermon: I've always believed even as a tiny child that it's in the receiving of the bread and wine at our Eucharist service that I come the closest that I can to Jesus. It's that moment of physical and spiritual nourishment which in its mysterious way feeds me and enables me to live my life fully as a believing Christian. I receive Jesus in the bread and wine – he lives in me and I in him and each time I do this, it's a reminder of the closeness of that relationship. Today in our Gospel reading Luke tells us that it was in the breaking of the bread that Cleopas and his companion recognised Jesus – hold on to that thought and I'll return to it at the end.

Of course as a very young child I couldn't receive the bread or wine, although I really longed to. Back then I wouldn't have been able to explain why I had that longing, there was just something amazing about it that I wanted to be wholly a part of. I had to wait as many people do, for my confirmation. I'm sure we could all say why we believe as Christians that it's so important that we receive the bread and wine regularly, but at the moment none of us can. How is it though for people who - through their different life experiences and situations – can't ever receive the bread and wine? What is it like for them? I'm thinking of people with severe disabilities or people who are imprisoned, or those who are too fearful because of persecution. In not receiving the bread and wine, is their experience of Jesus a kind of watered down, or partial version, of mine? We won't have time to theologically unpack this right now, but it's been on my mind a lot recently because we're all in a similar position at the moment.

And so I've been reflecting on two particular situations which have made me question my own strongly held beliefs about the importance of being able to eat the bread and drink the wine, and I'd like to share these very briefly with you.

Firstly, a young man called Jonathan. Jonathan was born prematurely with cerebral palsy following a car accident whilst he was still in his mum's tummy. He's now 14 years old. He's never walked or sat up unaided, he's never spoken a single word, and he's on oxygen 24 hours a day. He's never eaten anything because he can't swallow, and so he gets all of his food through a little button in his side. His Dad is a priest and was my training incumbent whilst I was at theological college and I have Jonathan's permission to talk about him today. I tweeted him, and he replied, unaided.

At Communion services, I've seen Jonathan's mum place his feet on hers and penguin walk him up to the communion rail, where his dad would be standing ready to offer the bread and wine. Jonathan was confirmed a few years back, but I don't think he can consume the bread and wine in the way that many of us can. This kind of situation challenges me: if it is in receiving the bread and wine that we become the closest to Jesus that we can possibly be as humans, and that's the place where we're fed and nourished, how is it for thousands of people with severe disabilities who can't ever receive? Surely it simply cannot be possible that they are less fed and nourished on Jesus than I am? I find that impossible to believe – and yet we hold on to the importance of physical participation.

A while ago it was discovered that Jonathan had a very high IQ - and he ended up attending the same mainstream secondary school as my two children. He's had his first book published - you can buy it on Amazon - and it has a forward by Michael Morpurgo, Jonathan's favourite author. It was discovered that Jonathan was as eloquent and as capable of communicating as anyone else, just in a different way, by using a letter board and directing his eyes to look at each letter, and slowly but surely he spells out every word he wants to say or write. Jonathan's life story is both extremely humbling and totally awesome. His faith is as strong as the highest mountain.

My second reflection was from a time I spent in a chaplaincy in a women's prison. One day there was a national strike and the prison was in lockdown because that was the only way it could operate securely. What that means is that no cell doors can be opened. 285 women, some sharing three to a cell, unable to leave their cells to have their usual one hour's exercise or attend their usual work or education classes within the prison. It just so happened that the strike fell on the day of our midweek Chapel services. As chaplains, having decided to cross the picket line, we then held our own small communion service, just three of us, consecrating the wafers as usual, and we were then able to make our way around the wings of the prison and along the corridors passing the wafers through the barred peepholes in the cell doors.

The problem was, some cells for security reasons don't have bars at the doors, but reinforced glass instead, so all we could do for those women was offer a blessing through the glass. I should say that we only knocked on the doors of those who usually attended chapel but that amounted to some 75 or so women. My question is, for those who were only able to receive a blessing through the glass panel, and not participate fully in receiving and consuming the bread, were they receiving Jesus as fully as the others? Yet another challenge to my strongly held belief.

And so I'm left with a bit of a dilemma, which is the very great number of people across the world who, for one reason or another, are never able to physically participate by receiving the bread and wine - and how does that impact on my own belief, that that is the best way to come closest to Jesus.

I'm reminded of something someone once told me as he tried to get me to see things from different perspectives: and with apologies to all cat lovers; 'Ness', he said, 'there's more than one to skin a cat'. Which leaves me wondering whether those who cannot eat the bread and drink the wine have their own unique experience of Jesus instead. That must be possible, but it feels somehow uncomfortable and unsatisfactory, patronising even. We might also note in Luke's text that although Cleopas and his companion went on to share in the bread, we're told that they recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread: it doesn't look as though from what Luke says they told others, that it was in the consuming of it that they experienced that great revelation; that had already happened. Dare I then, as a Priest called to Eucharistic ministry, dwell on those words of Luke, and allow them to test my previously strongly held belief? I surely must, if I'm to understand different peoples' experiences and perspectives.

Cleopas and his companion also recalled that, as they'd walked along the road to Emmaus with Jesus, their hearts had burned within them. Today we know how much our hearts burn within us as we long to be able to receive the bread and wine again. But at this present time, we join instead and perhaps stand in empathic solidarity with those millions of people for whom disability or other context prohibits their Eucharistic involvement – and I wonder how much their hearts burn continually within them? Today we're grateful for the Eucharistic fellowship that we do have and can participate in - and we pray for those who always feel detached and alone. Amen.