**30th April 2017**

**Luke 24.13-35**

**Emmaus: What are you focused on?**

One of the things that I find most surprising about the journey to Emmaus is the inability of the disciples to recognise Jesus.  With this reality in mind I want to do something a little different and show you a short video as recommended by Australian Uniting Church Minister Peter Lockhart[[1]](#endnote-1)

[The Awareness Test](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4>

The video clip shows people throwing a basketball and you are asked to count how many passes they make. But by giving your attention to the basketball players you miss the moonwalking gorilla walking through the middle of them. The caption says: It’s easy to miss something you are not looking for. Look out for cyclists: Advert by London transport.

Now it is not exactly the same sort of scenario as Jesus walking with the disciples to Emmaus but what is interesting in this little experiment is to reflect on the issues associated with whether or not we can see something or not, and more specifically how we experience Jesus.

With this in mind I want to explore a few issues raised by the story for us.

The first is to do with where our attention is focussed.

The second is to do with Jesus presence with us.

And the third is connected with how we come to perceive that presence.

So to the first point; in the story from St Luke the disciples were lost in their grief and mourning and the shattering of their world had become an all-consuming reality.  When Jesus met them on the road they conveyed to the unknown stranger the events that had unfolded.  So consumed were they by the events that they could barely believe that this stranger did not know what had occurred.

Like when we watched the Awareness Test their attention was focussed on something specific on their particular experience of what had occurred and how it had impacted on them.

As people who are walking through the journey of our lives day by day our attention is focussed in particular ways on particular things – important things no doubt but things that can blind us to who is journeying with us.

For me this is a twofold issue.  First to reflect on what kinds of things are we focussed on and second who told us that those were the most important things.

Thinking about our own lives: maybe it is our work that so consumes us, or our desire to be a good parent, or an issue going on in our relationship with our spouse, maybe it is concerns about repaying our house mortgage or worries about our health or our sense of grief and loss over a loved one.  In fact most of us would know and no doubt some of us have experienced times in our lives that we are so focussed on something going on that we begin to simply miss what is occurring before our eyes in other parts of our life.

The advent of the internet, smart phones, tablets, and social media is both a blessing and a bane for society. The common complaint is that people may be present with you but also absent. You can have everyone sat round the dining table but no one is talking to anyone else because they are all on their phones.

Researchers are discovering that many people are now addicted to technology. Rob parsons comments[[2]](#endnote-2) how he heard a man talk about an incident that occurred with his young son. He said ‘it was about 7pm and since I’d gone home from work an hour earlier, I’d been doing my emails. Every few minutes my son had been trying to get my attention, but I’d carried on what the emails. Ethan came up to me yet again and grabbed my arm: ‘Dad, can I show you something I painted at school today? ‘I snapped back at him, ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’ His head dropped and as he walked away I heard my seven year old son comment: ‘you’re a nicer person without your iPhone’

Getting the balance right is never easy. One of the regrets many people have at the end of their lives is that they wish they hadn’t worked so hard – or rather that they spent too much time working. There’s a well-known saying that sums it up succinctly: ‘nobody ever said on their death bed, ‘I wish I’ spent more time at the office’. Working long hours can just become a lifestyle. One man said he could achieve just as much if he’d work fewer hours but used those hours more effectively.

Whatever you are focussed on the second part of the issue is how we came to be focussed on that particular thing.  In the video for example we were told to count the passes – someone told us to look in a particular direction.  Who has told us to be focussed in a particular direction? Or what incidents and experiences have determined the central issues for us?  This bears some reflection.

It can be argued, that the sense of loss that was distracting the disciples was entirely appropriate. So whilst I would say that the things which take our attention are not unimportant, they do matter, these distractions of life can also obscure our sense and experience of Jesus who walks with us.

So we all have issues that even if they don’t keep we awake at night certainly occupy our thinking.  What the reading does is to encourage us to think that in the midst of our daily walk what might surprise us is that just as Jesus came alongside the disciples so too Jesus comes alongside us.

The disciples were completely oblivious to Jesus identity until after he broke the bread.  The hope that this gives to all of us is that in midst of these issues which take up our time and worry and detach us from Jesus presence as if we were alone facing the world is that Jesus is not absent from us but it is precisely in these times of distraction and isolation that he journeys with us.

Jesus is there with us as we grieve at the pain and loss of death, Jesus is there as we try to make sense of why we bother going to work to face the daily grind, Jesus is there as we go to ever increasing number of doctors and specialist appointments, Jesus is there as we struggle with family relationships, Jesus is walking beside us in all of these situations.  This is the promise of our faith.

Having said this Jesus presence is not simply about us having some nice feel good experience even though these words bring us comfort.  Jesus presence with us is about teaching and challenge and change for there are times that Jesus is alongside us in ways that may be unexpected and even uncomfortable.

As Jesus says in Matthew 25 “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”  Jesus is alongside us and we meet Jesus not simply as some sort of detached internal spiritual experience but in real people in real need!

This brings me to my third point.  When the disciples stop to refresh and renew themselves for the evening Jesus agrees to break bread with them.  It is in this breaking of the bread that the disciple’s eyes are opened to his identity.

The connection with the sharing of bread and wine that we do on this day is clear and is often spelt out for us in the words repeated in the communion prayer asking that Jesus ‘make yourself know to us in the breaking of the bread’.  In the video we watched what was required was for someone to actually ask a question of us.

Actually seeing Jesus presence required an action by Jesus which helped them see that he had been with them the whole time and to find value in his presence on every step pf the journey – it’s that hindsight thing.

Now for me this becomes a metaphor for what occurs in our gathered Sunday worship service when we listen for Jesus teaching us through the Scriptures and then the bread is broken in our midst.  It is in this time of coming together that we can begin to reflect on how Jesus has been with us in the days that have passed and consider what this might mean for us in the days ahead. Coming to church, and coming every week, is important.

I sat in the church in which I grew up in on Thursday this week when I attended my mother’s funeral. We had ad the committal at the Crematorium first and it was hard to not be aware of your own grief and loss. People arriving would be lovely and sympathetic and say ‘sorry about your loss’, ‘how are you doing’, all of which just drew attention to our loss and our grief. Sam and I helped to carry mum’s coffin and I stifled back the tears in order to get down the aisle without dropping it.

It was only when we got to the church that my attention was not on myself but on others and on the gospel. I gave the tribute to my mum so I recalled her life and others later chipped in with their favourite stories and impressions of my mother. The minster did a great job in taking the service and reminded us of the truth of the gospel that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Behind her hanging up over the pulpit was banner that simply said ‘God’s Promises never fail’ with a picture of the rainbow. God’s promises never fail. I was being spoken to, to receive again the promises of scripture: I am the resurrection and the life’.

In the church afterwards we talked with so many people who I had not seen for years. People would say ‘do you remember me?’ My answer was an embarrassed ‘err no!’ They would then gently remind me. There was a woman there who I was at primary school with me. That was embarrassing because I remember playing doctors and nurses with her at the age of seven! I spoke with some elderly people whose children were in the church youth group when I was at the church. What had become of them? Some were living abroad, some had families and some were divorced. One lad who I had shared my faith was and helped him find Christ was now thinking about entering Christian ministry or church community work. Another woman who was actually there was a year off becoming ordained as a Church minister. God’s promises never fail. It was heartening to see that some seed had fallen on good soil and produced a crop and that Jesus was at work in some of those people’s lives.

Then finally my brother produced a letter that he had found when he had been clearing up my mother’s room at the Care Home. It was tucked away in an old photograph album and we never knew it existed. It was a letter that my father had written to my mother within days of them first meeting a dance at Blackpool Tower Ballroom in 1950. My Dad was working in Blackpool at the time. My mother was on a short holiday there from her home in Burnley. I gathered all the family around and read it out. Reading dads’ handwriting was always a struggle and he was left handed and so the writing sloped the opposite way but I tried my best. In the letter he said that these three days that I knew you were the best days I have spent for a long time and he was sorry that they had to come to an end. He wrote ‘all last night in bed I couldn’t help thinking about you, wondering whether I would ever see you again, which I hope we do’.

It was magical reading that letter. It transported us back to a time when mum and dad were young and in love and fully alive. Instead of focussing on a death we were reminded that we were celebrating a life lived and also because of the promises of god to us a life once more reunited.

Initially my attention had been focused on my own grief and getting through the day of the funeral. Then I was made aware of the presence of others and the gifts of grace through that. The presence of God and his promises that never fail spoke to me and Jesus the one who is the Resurrection and the Life. All that happened with intention in the presence of worship and the fellowship of the church.

Ultimately the experience for the disciples of Jesus appearance to them is not just about them and what they get out of it.  Jesus leaves the disciples and they go back to the others to share their news.  They were energised by Jesus appearance to them, energised to go and share the good news.  To follow him and in doing so to share his ministry.

Encountering the risen Jesus invites our response.  Our experience of him changes us.  The story of Jesus appearance on the road to Emmaus is certainly a challenging one – it reminds us that whilst Jesus may be alongside us sometimes it takes some pretty direct action for us to see that.  But having met with the risen Jesus we too can be encouraged and inspired in our journey to keep our hearts and minds open to his constant presence with us inviting us to grow as we follow him. And more than that we contemplate how we meet Jesus in others and how through our lives and the questions we raise we bring Jesus to others.

1. [**http://revplockhart.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/emmaus-what-are-you-focused-on.html**](http://revplockhart.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/emmaus-what-are-you-focused-on.html) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rob Parsons, The Wisdom house, Hodder, 2015, p112 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)