

Fr Gerry McFlynn: Finding hope on our own road to Emmaus

Just as two early disciples discovered on the dusty road to Emmaus, we are likely to find Jesus alongside us at the place where we when we feel anxious, confused and overwhelmed by life's problems and difficulties.

'Two of Jesus' followers were walking on the road to Emmaus. As they were talking, Jesus himself came up and walked with them. But the two men did not realise who he was...'

I suppose we all have our favourite Easter story. Mine is the one of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

I have often thought that it was tacked on to the end of Luke's Gospel to give us all hope for the future.

It is a strange story. But then all the stories about how Jesus appeared to people after his death are strange, and the strangest thing about them is how unglamorous they are.

If you or I had written them, it would have been hard to resist giving them a little more polish.

They contrast markedly with the stories surrounding his birth. There we have angels, shepherds and kings from the East bearing expensive gifts; here, all we have are two people walking along a dusty road to a town that nobody had heard much about and being joined by a stranger who turned out to be Jesus, whom they did not even recognise.

Those days following Jesus' death must have been very hard for his disciples. They had been so used to having him with them as comforter and friend. He had filled them with dreams of a kingdom where peace and justice flourished. He had helped them believe in themselves, each in his or her uniqueness - the sunburnt fisherman, the tax collector, the idealistic Zealot, the woman who dared to sit at his feet.

And they had all believed in him, his love, his laughter and his words. That was until three days ago. Late Friday afternoon he died, and then there was Saturday which should have been the worst day except that somehow or other perhaps it was not. Maybe the worst day was the third day, Sunday, which for the Jews was like our Monday with everything returning to 'normal'.

He had made great promises and claims and many people had believed in him.

But now he was dead. So for at least two of his followers there was nothing left to do but get out of town and reflect on the great failure of his life and the end of the dream. But even there they could not escape him. He followed them just as he follows each one of us on our life's journey.

And the place where we find him is likely to be Emmaus, the place where we, too, go when we feel anxious, confused and overwhelmed by life's problems and difficulties. But even in Emmaus there are questions we cannot escape, such as the direction of our lives, the sort of people we are, our views and values in life and what we really believe.

And it is in the midst of such questioning that we find him. Not in some sort of mystical daydream but in the midst of life's ordinary, everyday experiences. This is the element that all the stories about Jesus' return to life have in common: Mary waiting at the empty tomb and suddenly turning to see somebody; all the disciples except Thomas, hiding in a locked room and Jesus coming and standing in their midst; Peter taking his boat back after a night's fishing and finding Jesus standing on the shore offering breakfast; and the two disciples at Emmaus recognising him while having supper.

He never approached from on high, but always in the midst of real life and the questions that real life asks.

So when we walk, we should remember that he walked from town to town, just as he walked with those two disciples to Emmaus.

When we celebrate, remember that he liked to celebrate and once turned water into wine so that a wedding party could continue.

And when we weep, we should remember that he wept over the death of his friend, Lazarus. And when we touch another person, we should remember that he was never scandalised by love and let the woman who burst into Simon's house uninvited, kiss him from head to toe.

And when we eat a meal together, remember how he loved to eat with his friends and that our sacrament of the Eucharist has its origin at the table. In everything we do, from the most ordinary to the most extraordinary, we should remember that he is with us, that he goes before us and that, as St Augustine put it, he is closer to us than our next drawn breath.

That's surely the hope-filled message of this and all the post-Resurrection stories.

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