

SERMON FOR EASTER 3 | 26.04.2020

Acts 2: 13-14 , 36-41; I Peter 1: 17-23; St Luke 24: 13-35

Jesus was with us – just like he promised... This retelling of the walk on the Emmaus Road by Diane Craven has been sitting on my shelves for about 15 years and comes from a compendium of resources called *About to receive*, put together by the Diocese of Southwark in 2005. I hope you found it as helpful as I did because it is long enough to give us time to take in just how Cleopas felt that day - especially the opening passage which talks about that dreadful yawning void that the disciples felt after the Crucifixion.

In the parish we have just heard the news that Rose Baker has died from a heart attack. Rose was 91 in January and so full of life still that it is very hard to imagine her not being with us still, full of love and bubbling good humour. For the disciples on the road who had watched Jesus die on Calvary, not only did they have to cope with the manner of his death but also the way all their hopes and dreams had crashed to the floor at the same time. There was no easy way of losing Jesus – and this was the worst possible way for it to happen.

The ‘wise words’ that people often trot out after a bereavement is that *time is a great healer and so and so will get over their loss* – as if it were just a matter of time and determination. That is patently nonsense – we never fully get over losing someone close. As Robert Addington’s son Matt has just texted (Robert, another member of the congregation, died on Good Friday aged 94) *it’s difficult to envisage the gap in my life his death has created – especially in lock-down. As John Donne wrote so sagely, each man’s death diminishes me.*

But more than that: each and every experience has something to teach us - if we allow it to.

Some of us are reading chapters from Rowan William’s short book *Luminaries: twenty lives that illuminate the Christian way*. As Kerry has said, his style takes a bit of getting used to but the book really does have some revealing things to say. This week Ken Thomson has invited us to read the four pages on Ety Hillesum (pp131-5) and I am so glad he did: for me the insight that Rowan picks out helped enormously as I thought about the Emmaus Road story.

Etty Hillesum was only 29 when she died in Auschwitz in 1943. For two years while she had worked as a social welfare officer at a Jewish refuge centre at Westerbork, she kept a diary, finally published in 1981. While she describes the infinite horror of the situation in which she found herself, there is a parallel story of how she coped, indeed, how she grew, in response to the trauma all around her. In one passage she writes: *The sky is full of birds, the purple lupins stand up so regally and peacefully, two little old women have sat down for a chat, the sun is shining on my face – and right before our eyes, mass murder... The whole thing is simply beyond comprehension.*

But somehow Etty Hillesum began to find a way of moving beyond the Nazi's 'final solution', the death of so many of her Jewish compatriots. Etty's natural optimism and her sense of the goodness within people was not a kind of cushion against reality but a way of re-orientating her attention to listen to her inner, real self.

And what she discovered was that it was there, in her inner spirit, that she found God to be already at work – what she describes as *the path of You in them*. She goes on: *so let this be the aim of meditation: to turn our innermost being into a vast empty plain, with none of that treacherous undergrowth to impede the view, so that something of "God" can enter you - and something of "Love" too*. The image that she uses – despite her determination earlier in life never to be a mother – is a very feminine one: of something growing inside her: *even if we don't want it, God ripens...*

I hope you too can see the parallel with the feelings in (the male!) Cleopas on the Emmaus Road. There is no doubting the despair that the crucifixion had brought about. As Diane Craven's line has it: *But a bit of us refused to believe that he was dead: it made no sense after all he had taught us...*

What the walk along that long and dusty road in the company of Jesus managed to do was take the despair - and the faint glimmer of hope - and fan it into something positive. As Diane's account says, it was the way Jesus retold the story that turned the original, gloomy analysis into Good News, something that they could be proud of.

God ripening...

Some have criticized Etty Hillesum for being unduly passive in the face of such suffering. I think that might be a bit unfair: she was not denying the pain of the Holocaust. But she was steeped in the writing of Dostoevsky and she recognized, as Rowan says, that suffering was not to be fled from - but to be utilized and transformed. That is why I will never read that rather silly poem sometimes chosen at funerals, 'Death is nothing at all...' Death is real and often terribly difficult.

What Hillesum is encouraging us to do is not to ignore what is in front of us but to sit with these painful episodes – neither in anger nor in denial – and to allow God to use that space to allow that ripening to take place. In my experience that space often needs a lot of time.

Yet here in St Luke's account we have the evidence of how powerful it can be. *Did not our hearts burn within us*, says a breathless Cleopas as he realises what Jesus has done. Only Jesus could have put all the pieces back together again in a way that could remake the broken hopes of the apostolic band.

But before we finish there is one other line from Rowan Williams' chapter that I want to recall. It refers to the last bit of the Gospel not included in Diane Craven's version. You will remember that as soon as Jesus has disappeared from his place at the table, Cleopas and his friend rushed back to Jerusalem. Why is that so important?

Because, as Etty Hillesum reminds us, once God has revealed himself – has implanted himself in us and transformed our story - we have to take responsibility for what he is doing: *You cannot help us*, she wrote in her diary, *we must help You to help ourselves; we must safeguard that little piece of you, God, in ourselves. Safeguard – and share. There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?*

Etty, Cleopas – hopefully us too: we are witnesses to the power of Jesus to re-craft the events of our lives and to transform our sorrow and our pain. And witnesses are no use unless they speak of what they have seen and known. In our locked-down state, may we give space and time to these stories so that when our freedom comes, we are ready for the challenge of saying, in whatever context we find ourselves: God has truly turned our sorrow into joy!