

An Address for St David's Parish, Exeter, by Jonathan Draper

26/4/20; Easter 3: the road to Emmaus

We're all getting used to the idea that we live in strange times. I doubt many of us can remember anything quite like the lockdown we're experiencing now. We've all got ruined hands from washing them all the time, we're gradually coming to understand how long 2 metres is, and after doing all the jobs that need doing around the house, we're having to come to terms with a different, and perhaps, slower way of life. There seems no point in rushing into anything when we've suddenly got more time to do things.

We're also getting used to the idea of the Vicar as a media star: hosting his own show once a week into which lots of people tune. Like the first disciples and their experience of the risen Jesus, we're getting used to seeing without touching, of experiencing things virtually – though we might in a Christian context really want to talk about 'augmented reality' instead of 'virtual reality': the work of God's Holy Spirit will not be confined by lockdown, and closed doors are no impediment to the presence of the risen Jesus with us. The Holy Spirit augments the narrow, constrained nature of our present experience.

On the same day that Mary Magdalene and the other women testified to the resurrection, and, of course, were not believed, this same risen Jesus is found walking with two disciples as they made their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a walk of about 7 miles. The two disciples seem to take the sudden appearance of this stranger with remarkable calm, and they engage in a conversation, rather like many of us are doing with our neighbours and the people we meet taking their allowed one hour's exercise. Jesus leads them through a short biblical and theological explanation of what they had witnessed in Jerusalem: the death of the Jesus they were talking about. As they near Emmaus they persuade Jesus to stay for supper. When Jesus takes the bread, breaks and blesses it, they recognise who he is, and he then promptly disappears. So they get up and head back to Jerusalem to tell the 11 what had happened, and how they recognised him in the breaking of the bread.

Whatever we may think is happening with an online communion – and the debates on Twitter among clergy, as you can imagine, are raging; and it's real 'how many angels can dance on the head of a pin' stuff – when the risen Jesus comes among us, wherever we are, he will be known in the breaking of the bread. Not in our teaching and preaching alone, but in the simple act of breaking bread. Before there were clergy, before there were authorised Eucharistic prayers, before there was a tradition debating the nature of the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements of bread and wine, the risen Jesus was known in the breaking of bread. The risen Jesus is with us now, in our separation, and in our gathering together online, no less than he was with those two disciples on the way to Emmaus, or with Mary by the garden tomb, or with the disciples in a locked upper room.

But Jesus isn't only known in the breaking of special bread baked by nuns in a special oven in a holy place. The bread he broke and blessed in Emmaus was their evening meal. Jesus is known in the times when we break bread too, when we share a meal with our family and friends. Jesus is known when we break bread to feed the hungry, when we break bread to comfort those who mourn, or those who are refugees, or those who are simply sad. Jesus is known in all the small ways in which we break the bread of compassion, friendship, kindness, and care. Jesus is made known in the breaking of bread.

A couple of hours after Jesus broke the bread with them, the disciples from Emmaus were back in Jerusalem with the rest of the disciples talking with them about what had happened. Jesus, again, suddenly appears, and simply says, 'peace be with you'. Perhaps this is the great truth to take from this story along with Jesus being known in whatever ways and in whatever places we break bread, and that is that he comes among us to bring us his peace. We should not be surprised to find that Jesus is among us as we break bread or as we try to digest and understand the things that are happening around us – he comes among us to bring us peace: hearts that are no longer troubled, no longer afraid, hearts that know we can trust God's love for us shown in the love we have for each other.

Jesus is known in the breaking of bread. We can celebrate that fact wherever we are, in whatever circumstances, together or alone, in church or at home, in

the street, the garden, the hospital, or even in the bathtub. Jesus and his peace, God and God's love for us, will not be constrained by lockdown, physical distancing, or even full PPE. We can rejoice in that, knowing, as he said, that he is with us always.