

I'm going to begin this evening not with anything you would immediately associate with the Passion, but with two disciples encountering the risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus. I have quite early memories of wondering what all the fuss was with the Emmaus story; all the way through seminary I used to get quite restless when I had to listen to people going on about Emmaus yet again; and then I was introduced to the Emmaus Walk.

The Emmaus Walk was at the time used quite frequently with young people on retreats and days of recollection as a way of getting taciturn teenagers to talk about themselves. It involves walking with a friend you trust and talking about yourself, just as the two disciples and Jesus talked about themselves on the road to Emmaus; it then develops into a prayer experience where you continue talking about yourself, but explicitly to Jesus.

On one particularly moving occasion, we tried this out with a group of 10-11 year olds in the parish where I was a Curate. They took to the experience readily, and I know for certain that in the process they not only found themselves speaking to God through Jesus, but they also heard the voice of God speaking to them in Jesus.

The Emmaus experience is, as I've found myself saying from various pulpits over the years, a 'penny-dropping' experience. It is the experience where we are going through life in the ordinary way and unexpectedly discover Jesus alongside us; it is the experience when we think Jesus is far distant, dead and buried, and instead we find that Jesus is alive in the most unexpected place.

The Road to Emmaus, then, is a place where we can expect the unexpected, where we can expect to be surprised. Though why this should seem odd to us is

anyone's guess, because actually we ought to be aware that our God is, as the spiritual writer Gerry Hughes described God, a God of Surprises. God works on a logic we know well but are not accustomed to taking seriously: the logic of love. This love delights in surprising the beloved, in offering unexpected delights.

Hence the wisdom of those prayerful people who insisted on keeping the Song of Songs in the Canon of Scripture, the list of those books where we believe we find the authentic voice of God. While attempts have been made over the centuries to interpret the erotic content out of this book, and it seldom gets read in the course of the Liturgy, it is persistently present in the work of both religious and secular artists, most notably perhaps recently in a song by Kate Bush!

At this time of year we do actually hear some carefully edited extracts from this quite explicit poetry. We hear

from it as part of the Passover festivities, probably because the verse '*Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it*' is reminiscent of the crossing of the Red Sea, which each year forms the central crux of the Easter Vigil, just as each year it is the crux of the Hebrew Passover.

It is my conviction that the Church has had such an ambiguous approach to this erotic poetry – and to sex in general – because the Church has mistakenly got itself involved in what some Christians have seen as the struggle to gain people's souls. To gain a soul carries with it the idea that we need to have power over that person (in the name of God, of course) and so the Church becomes inevitably part of a power-game. Allowing people to be governed by their sexual urges is a contradiction of this power; hence sexuality is itself

suspect, and the beauty – and scriptural nature – of the Song of Songs is marred.

I am not saying that we should not practise self-control, or that anything goes – after all, the response of a lover is necessarily sacrificial because all the self is given over to the other – but I am saying that if our relationship with God follows the logic of love it has to include as part of itself every aspect of love which God has gifted to us in our physical nature. This is why the Church continues to teach that marriage has a sacramental nature, and why in the 1984 Prayer Book the words *‘with my body I honour you’* form the quite explicit version of the 1662 words *‘With my body I thee worship’*. Occasionally at a wedding practice I will find people sniggering at that point, as if we are talking about something dirty – but this is an awesome and

special thing, which God is not only blessing, but offering us as a model of God’s own love for us.

Neither the Road to Emmaus nor the Song of Songs works according to a logic of power and control. Instead we see people walking together, sharing their lives together, loving and longing together. Surely this ought to be the Church’s logic too – for this is clearly the context in which God chooses to be revealed to us?

Now imagine yourself walking downcast on the road home, with all your hopes apparently dashed, and longing for what Jesus seems to have promised. Imagine yourself longing for Jesus as much as that first love, taking over your life, leaving you nothing else in your thoughts or your being. *‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’* And when you found him, would you not *‘hold him, and not let him go’*?

The Emmaus experience, and that of the Song of Songs, are one and the same, for they reflect a love so strong it becomes an indelible seal on the heart, on the body. This love is strong as anything that threatens to take it away – yes, even death and the grave. This is the love that is not quenched by the waters of the flood, and certainly not by the grumbling and faithlessness of the people of Israel in the desert. This is the love that carries the Servant of God through suffering; it is the passionate love that pushes its way through the profundity of the Gospel of the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’; it is the love that carried Magdalene into proclaiming Christ’s resurrection in the face of disbelief. This is the love which conquered death for Jesus – and will conquer sin and death in us as well.

Between now and Sunday we will have another chance to journey into that love and to experience the length

and depth of the reality of God’s eternal life. We will experience in sacramental signs the utter self-giving of Jesus. We will experience the lover’s desolation at the utter absence of Jesus as he dies. We will experience the hardly believable reality that as the whole of God’s love enfolds him, Jesus is revealed again to us as alive, risen in God’s love and because he is part of God’s love.

I hope each one of us will have the time and space to follow our own Emmaus Walk, our own journey with Jesus through the cosmos-shattering reality of God’s love, and as we walk, give of ourselves, suffer, die and rise once more in him, that he will speak those words to us: *Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it* – and hearing his words resolve that we will *hold him, and not let him go*.

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