

REFLECTION 23 APRIL 2023 “Walking and talking”

By Rev Dr Fei Taule'ale'ausumai

I wonder how many Emmaus journeys have you experienced in your lifetime? There are many of us here who are widowed and have lost our spouses, some of us have lost siblings and even children, grandchildren. How long did you walk on the Emmaus road? These times in our grief and loss we are not alone, even though we may think we are. Jesus walks with us and we may feel the burning in our hearts and yet we don't recognise him. It is often retrospectively when we reflect on that time that we realise that we were not alone, that we were accompanied perhaps even carried through our grief to the other end by this Nazarene, Jesus.

There are also some people that come into our lives where we love to listen and converse or Talanoa and we don't want them to go, we want them to stay longer like to two who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus. I'm sure if you all had to think of a similar encounter in your lives you will be able to find such a story.

When I returned back to New Zealand in 1998 from Birmingham UK I came home because dad had had a stroke. It was hard leaving a job that I loved in the UK and coming back to NZ to be with family and look for another job. My job in England felt like it had a pulse coming back to Auckland felt flat and lifeless it had no pulse. I was experiencing culture shock and didn't find the transition very easy. During this time I wrote an article for our church magazine Crosslink called Unsung Heroes which celebrated the ministry and service of our lay people in the church. It talked about how ministers come and

go but the people remain. My dad was session clerk of our church in Glen Eden for 30 years. The new minister encouraged him to retire and dad said the day I retire is the day I die this is Gods work. The new minister wanted new blood and so dad reluctantly gave notice at the next elections that he was not standing again. That day when the elections were held I was home for the holidays and I was asked to be scrutineer. I counted the votes and dad did not win; he told the people not to vote for him. And so a new session clerk was elected. I thought at the end of the election's dad would get an opportunity to say thankyou to the church for their 30 years of support whilst he was session clerk and his 30 years of loving service. But instead the new minister looked at his watch and said, the mat is hot in Samoan this is ua vela le fala and we are all hungry. The new session clerk said "Taule'ale'a (my dad's name) there will come a day", which I took to mean your opportunity to celebrate your service is yet to come. Nothing ever eventuated. Dad felt a lot of guilt for retiring from that role as he felt it was not God's timing. When a guest preacher took the pulpit dad asked him if he could have an opportunity to say his thankyou then. According to my sister, dad said "I finally understand what it feels like to be a piece of rubbish discarded on the road, he cried and the congregation cried. He expressed his hurt at being overlooked and not being given the opportunity to give his thanks to the people. In someways it broke him. He had a stroke not long afterwards. That is why I wrote the story of Unsung Heroes to honour lay people like him. Even though dad was still alive I had already started grieving. I believe that is when my Emmaus Road began. I struggled with the church, the people, the politics and the disrespect for my father that came with it. I was fighting his battle on his behalf. I remember when the article was published I went to his bedside and read it to him. He was nonverbal by this stage but I knew he had heard it; it was my way of thanking him whilst he was

still alive. It was my way of bringing him flowers whilst he could still appreciate it instead of saving it for his funeral. By the time he died I felt as if I had no more tears to shed, I had already done it in the months leading up to his death. That whole time I felt the burning in my heart and I knew that Christ had been walking with me. Can some of you relate to that?

Another aspect of the Emmaus road is that sometimes we can have better conversations when walking alongside someone than addressing ù directly, particularly when the subject matter is difficult. Think of a time this may have happened to you on a walk or sitting side by side on a car journey.

Could the two Cleopas and the unnamed disciples have 'got there' in their understanding if they had been sitting? Walking integrates mind and body and offers perspective along the way.

Whatever actual experience may lie behind the story; it is now an invitation. It invites us to join the journey. A nice creative tension develops as they wander down the road. It arises because according to Luke 24:1-12 the reports of the women had not convinced the disciples.

New Testament scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that Emmaus is nowhere. Emmaus is nowhere precisely because Emmaus is everywhere. Each and every one of us has at one time, or indeed for some of us, many times, travelled along the road to Emmaus.

The disciples had been with Jesus for three years. Couldn't they recognise His voice, connect with His manner? How much did the resurrected Jesus differ from the Jesus of Nazareth?

They were blinded by grief and a deep sense of loss. Their heads were bowed. The disciples were astonishingly unaware of who they were walking with, and yet it is completely understandable to us as human beings. Think about how you may have travelled frequently along a route for a long time, but now no longer notice certain things.

Jesus asks a question and lets the disciples tell their story. Luke is the only one of the four gospel writers to include this story.

Before we can be heard, the people we are with need to know that they have been heard and that we have felt the pain of their story in all its sadness and pain. Jesus' conversation is not about giving answers but bringing a bigger perspective to their story.

Breaking bread over a meal or communion opens our eyes to see Jesus and all that He means.

As soon as the disciples recognise Jesus He vanishes from their sight – the first of several such post-resurrection appearances. The two disciples receive no directions from Jesus about how to live. The direction comes instead from the transformative power of the encounter itself. The two rush off back to Jerusalem to tell the others about meeting the resurrected Jesus.

According to Bill Loader, Luke invites us to imagine something more mysterious: a materialising and dematerialising risen Jesus who makes appearances and then vanishes. This was consistent with how the early traditions understood Jesus' resurrection - and ours. It is the same person, embodied, but now transformed or transfigured into a new way of being and being embodied.

Whatever actual experience may lie behind the story; it is now an invitation. It invites us to join the journey. A nice creative tension develops as they wander down the road. So Luke's congregations, hearing the story, know the resurrection has taken place. They (and we) comprehend a good deal more about what had happened than they did.

When Jesus comes on the scene Luke probably intends us to imagine some divine control preventing recognition, rather than a ploy on the part of Jesus. It is an interesting conversation for what it does, in fact, say. These disciples were hoping that Jesus would bring liberation for Israel. That hope took many forms, some military, some peaceful, but it underlies all of Luke's story.

In the words of scholar and ex-nun Karen Armstrong "as we wander toward Emmaus these rumours of compassion lead us to believe that God is not dead at all, but that God is alive and well and comes to us in the guise of a stranger. With our hearts burning, with us as the stranger talks to us on the road, the scriptures are opened to us. It's time for us to reclaim the Christianity that has been high-jacked and resurrect compassion so that our faith can be a pathway to peace. It's time for us to reclaim that ancient ability to recognize the divine in the eyes of the stranger, and yes even in the hearts of our enemies. Believing that God is alive is not the point. Behaving like God is alive is the beginning of compassion. For those of us who call ourselves Christian, recognizing CHRIST, recognizing the DIVINE in the stranger is the pathway to justice, peace, and mercy. Let it be so among us." Amen.