

# 26 April 2009 Sermon

## ‘Seeing is Believing... (?)’ [PART 2]

**Isaiah 26:2-9, 19**

**Luke 24:13-35**

This morning’s Gospel reading, of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, is a rich and compelling story with many layers of meaning to it.

Because of the gold-mine quality of Luke’s account, it is one of the favourites for many preachers. I have heard this preached many times and have alluded to it myself in a sermon only 4 weeks ago.

This is not a lectionary reading for today, and so you may well wonder why I’ve felt it necessary to reflect on it today...

Last week’s sermon considered the place of personal examination in assisting belief, particularly whether historical inquiry will ever be convincing for the Christian claims about the identity of Jesus.

The demand by Thomas was that, in order to believe in the risen Jesus, he would have to examine the wounds of Jesus for himself: “Unless I see for myself...”

This seemingly reasonable expectation for such massive claims of resurrection by the hand of God Almighty, is also part of today’s story. And today’s story offers additional insight into this problem of whether ‘seeing really is believing’.

Those who heard the sermon last week will recall that, on the face of it, there does seem to be a problem of the gap between us and the historical events of Jesus. We are at such a distance from those particular events that we seem to be at a disadvantage to the contemporaries of Jesus.

If we could just see for ourselves the miracles Jesus performed.  
If we could just see for ourselves the passion with which Jesus related to people.

If we could just see for ourselves the risen Jesus standing among us recognisable as the same one who had been crucified.

We can feel a bit like Thomas: “Unless I see for myself...”

We know we can't see those events of Jesus for ourselves, because we weren't there. But where does that leave us in being able to believe the claims made about Jesus;  
the claims of his contemporaries,  
the claims of the NT,  
the claims of the Church?

Are we forced to access these events by way of historical inquiry? Must we commit ourselves to a project of historical inquiry with the hope that uncovering facts about the events of Jesus will lead us to belief in Jesus, the Christ?

Well, we heard how, for Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, such a project is a waste of time.

1. In the first place, historical facts alone are unlikely to be compelling enough for the claims made about Jesus. Even if the historical facts could be uncovered, they are unlikely to help us do anything more than admire Jesus as an exemplary historical figure. The historical facts will not get us near the radical claims about Jesus as the risen Son of God. This theological claim lies beyond the reach of historical investigation.
2. Secondly, Kierkegaard states that there is actually no benefit in being a contemporary of Jesus when it comes to comprehending the truth about his identity. The appearance of Jesus, what the eyes actually see, is likely to hinder rather than help our understanding of his true identity – for his appearance is that of an ordinary man. The NT makes it very clear that contemporaries of Jesus became incensed by what he claimed about himself – for all they saw was an ordinary man.  
For most contemporaries of Jesus, seeing was not believing.

What about today's story of the two on the road to Emmaus...?

Is seeing believing for these two?

We are told that these two were heading home to Emmaus. They were heading home sad. They are sad, we are told, because Jesus had been crucified, and they had rather hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

Understandable.

But in addition to Jesus' death, these two had heard about some rather unusual events since Jesus' crucifixion...

*“some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup>and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup>Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said...” (Lk 24:22-24)*

These two on their way to Emmaus had heard the testimony of two groups of their fellow disciples:

1. Firstly, the testimony of the women: they had told them they found the tomb empty and had seen a vision of angels who said Jesus was alive.
2. Secondly, the testimony of the others who went to the tomb and confirmed the first part of the women’s testimony.

Wouldn’t it be fair to assume that such confirmation of the first part of the women’s testimony (the tomb is indeed empty) would make the second part of their testimony more compelling? (that they were told Jesus is alive)

...but these testimonies of others are presumably unconvincing.

The testimony of others (people they are close to) has not generated belief.

The confirmation that the tomb is indeed empty has not generated belief.

They have dismissed the possibility of a risen Jesus without further investigation.

And so they head home...

As they shuffle sadly along their way, they are joined by none other than the risen Jesus himself. Yet they do not comprehend the truth of what is before them; the truth of who is before them.

Even walking and talking with the risen Jesus doesn’t allow them to comprehend the truth. They are seeing him with their own eyes – there is nothing wrong with their physical senses; they are working fine – but they are unable, on their own, to interpret what they see.

For these two then, ‘seeing is not believing’.

In relation to the deep truth of the situation, they have not ‘seen’ at all.

We cannot blame the disciples for this. They do not have the capacity to see the truth before them.

This is a whole new truth; the resurrection of Jesus is a reconstitution of the entire world order. It's not that these two are particularly short-sighted, imperceptive, or thick. They are dependent on God's help to understand the truth (just as we need God's help to understand the same truth).

This is why categories of historical inquiry are so limited. They cannot recognise the deep truth of resurrection reality. The truth cannot be comprehended in the same way we comprehend normal historical data. If we strip away any theological interpretation we will strip away that which we need to explain the truth of the risen Jesus.

Jesus guides them in their understanding, reflecting on the scriptures, helping them to interpret the truth revealed in the story of God and God's people.

But what was the moment when the truth hit them both? When do they recognise the truth before them?

Significantly, it is in the breaking of bread.

*"...at the table with them, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup>Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him"*

This the moment Caravaggio captures in his painting, that has been reproduced in the bulletin.

At the table Jesus acts, and in that moment their eyes are opened. Had they had their eyes closed? Of course not! We know exactly what this expression means; God has enabled them to perceive what physical sense alone could not.

It is difficult to accept that belief comes not by our own efforts, for sometimes it seems simpler that way; for we are in control.

A project that can be picked up, can also be put down – and we like that sort of autonomy and self-control.

It can also be difficult to accept that belief comes not by our own efforts because it leaves us unable to make others believe what we do by

persuasion or other forms of argument. A desire to share the good news with others does not guarantee they will believe it. Just like the testimony of the women and the others, on its own it is inadequate – not futile, but insufficient on its own.

Because belief is not something we can conjure up by our own efforts, we can, at times, even feel that our own belief in Jesus dip to excruciating lows, where we wonder about the truth that previously seemed so dependable and certain.

Hunger and thirst are things hard to quantify, yet they are real experiences. We can hunger and thirst for food and drink, but also for other things just as real.

How do we hope that our hunger and thirst may be met by God?

There are three aspects of our Church tradition and our life together that are commended as part of the Holy Spirit nurturing our belief.

Firstly, reading the Bible. We see Jesus guiding the two on the road through the scriptures, and by his Spirit, Jesus is present with us today. As we gather here to hear and reflect on our Bible readings, we trust that the Spirit is guiding us into truth. No preacher should ever presume to open their mouth unless he or she trusts that what comes out is guided by the Spirit, and that the words that project out will be interpreted by those listening in the strength of the same Spirit.

Secondly, our belief is nurtured in the act of shared faith (as we expressed this morning) in baptism. Baptism is a tangible living-out of this belief in Jesus' self-revelation. We are not 'manufacturing' belief, we are enacting what is accomplished already in Jesus: the revelation of God's grace available to all in him.

We baptise Niko, not because he has undertaken a project of inquiry into the truth of Jesus and been satisfied that belief is a reasonable response. Niko is baptised because we trust in the nurturing power of the Spirit in this community and because we want to intentionally re-commit ourselves to being this sort of community. In Niko's baptism, we are reminded of our own baptism. However we may feel God has marked us as his own with the seal of baptism.

Thirdly, our belief is sustained in Communion.

In our life together as God's people, this drama stands at the centre of who we are. This meal which Jesus presides over, reminds us, sustains us, and transforms us.

Like the two going to Emmaus, the risen Jesus himself draws us to the table where we share in the communion meal with him and with each other.

For it is with each other that we do these three things. The risen Jesus is present wherever we are gathered in his name. In these moments together we abide with God, able to open ourselves to the truth revealed to us, and to live into the truth, even if we don't feel sure about it.

In reading the Bible, in Baptism and in Communion we stand alongside each other upholding and supporting each other to remain with the truth that has been revealed to us. We remind each other of that we already know.

What we see here is not the whole truth. And we should be thankful for that!

Nevertheless, we are also thankful that the risen Jesus promises to reveal himself in our midst and to guide our living of life to its fullness!

The Lord has risen indeed!  
Thanks be to God.

Amen.