

Belief That Transforms

Luke 24.36b-48

What do people outside the Church see when they look at us – if, indeed, they ever do?

Do they see a small minority community in hiding, like the disciples cowering behind locked doors at the beginning of this morning's reading from Luke's gospel? Or do they see fearless proclaimers of repentance and forgiveness, like the apostles of Luke's second book, *The Acts of the Apostles*? Do people see the Church of God as a fortress besieged and crumbling under the unremitting assaults of science and secularism? Or do they see it as the communion of saints, clad in the whole armour of God, tirelessly leading the struggle against suffering and slaughter? Do people see a tired and tiny band, fearfully guarding the flickering flame of faith as the storm winds howl around us? Or do they see "salt" and "yeast" whose small but vital presence infuses and raises the whole of society?

The disciples' initial response to the death of Christ was total devastation. They became almost invisible, grieving behind closed doors (cf. Luke 24.12). This how we find them at the beginning of this morning's reading. And what led to this was their lack of belief.

At the end of our reading, however, their fear has turned to boldness, their confusion to conviction, their grief to joy, their wallowing to worship. Soon, they will be characterised by their witness as well; Luke writes a whole new book about that. And what led to this was their strength of belief.

What happened to transform them? If we were in a court of law, we'd have three exhibits to offer in evidence.

Exhibit One: the evidence of Jesus' resurrection

The two disciples who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus couldn't wait to tell the good news to their friends at Jerusalem. Immediately after they recognised Jesus and he disappeared, they rushed back, only to discover that Jesus had also appeared to Peter, who told them Jesus was indeed alive.

I've never seen a ghost. I've never felt the presence of my dead sister, Miranda. I've never had an "out-of-body" or "near-death" experience. Indeed, I've never experienced anything that I would call "supernatural". I've met many people who've described having these kinds of experiences, but I have no first-hand evidence of my own. I have, however, experienced severe mental illness, and been through long periods when I couldn't trust what was going on inside my

own head. More recently, I've been present at my mother's hospital bedside while she's been having hallucinatory experiences, and I've read enough to know that the brain can produce very strange effects when the fine balance of its electro-chemical activity is disturbed. So all I can do when people recount these unfamiliar experiences to me is try to keep an open mind; and that's not always easy, especially when one person's perceived reality seems to contradict another's.

What must it have been like for those disciples who had not encountered the risen Christ, hearing the accounts of his appearances on the Emmaus road and to Peter? They think they believe, but when Jesus appears among them and says, "Peace be with you" (24.36), they are not at all peaceful, but "startled" and "troubled" (24.37). The disciples were familiar with the idea of ghosts and believed in them, as did almost everyone in the ancient world, and at that moment all they can do is interpret their experience in a way that makes sense to them. They assume that Jesus is a ghost, because it makes more sense to them than to accept that Jesus is really there.

Luke, however, is writing a generation later, after experiencing at first hand the extraordinary expansion of Christianity out from Jerusalem, through Israel/Palestine, across Syria, Turkey and Greece, all the way to Rome itself. For Luke, it is absolutely impossible that an encounter with a mere ghost, who is more likely to inspire fear than faith in a first-century mind, can account for the apostles' remarkable missionary zeal. No other crucified Jewish rabble-rouser has had this sort of effect even while he was alive, let alone after his death. Jesus is more than a ghost, then; but how?

Luke, like Matthew and John, does something amazingly bold, something that was as likely to earn him ridicule in his own day as it would today. He tells us that the recently executed Jesus was physically present with his disciples. He tells us that Jesus encouraged the disciples to touch Him, to see that he had flesh and bones, and to look at His hands and His feet (verse 24.40); the inference is clear that he still bore the marks of the nails with which he was crucified. He tells us that Jesus ate some of the disciples' fish. Luke tells us that, in these ways, Jesus' resurrection body is like his previous earthly body, and that he is certainly no ghost. In other ways, we must infer that his resurrection body is different from his previous body, uninhibited by earthly constraints and physical barriers, able to pass through locked doors, and to appear and disappear at will. Luke tells us, in effect, that the risen Jesus has all the abilities and capacities of the Jesus who was crucified, but is no longer subject to limitations of time and place.

I mentioned in passing that Jesus greets the disciples with the words, "Peace be with you." It's important always to remember that the Hebrew word *shalom*, and its Aramaic and Arabic counterparts, carry far more profound implications than their European translations, *eirene*, *pax* and "peace". In the Hebrew Bible, *shalom* is closely associated with God's presence (e.g.

Leviticus 26.1-13; Numbers 6.22-26; Judges 6.11-24; Isaiah 9.1-7, 48.17-18, 59.1-8, 60.17-20; Ezekiel 37.24-28; Micah 5.5; Haggai 2.3-9), and the absence of peace is associated with God's absence or withdrawal. The peace of God and the presence of God are virtually inseparable. So when Jesus says, "Peace be with you," he is assuring them that God is present with them.

Exhibit Two: the evidence of Scripture

With the two disciples who were on the road to Emmaus, Jesus began with the biblical evidence concerning His rejection, suffering, death and resurrection. He was then revealed to them as he took bread, blessed and broke it at their dinner table, only to vanish from their sight. In this next encounter, the order is reversed: Jesus eats first and then interprets the Scripture.

First, Luke's account portrays Jesus explaining that there is nothing unfamiliar in what has happened; the rejection, death, and resurrection of the Messiah was one of the prominent prophetic themes of the Old Testament. Jesus refers to the Law of Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets; the three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible, reminding his disciples that the entire Old Testament bore witness to His suffering and death.

Luke made an allusion to this prophetic message at the start of his gospel, in Simeon's prophecy at Jesus' circumcision:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed"

(Luke 2.34-35).

It was also hinted at in the suffering of the forerunner, John the Baptist, and anticipated by Jesus' rejection when he first public identifies himself as the Messiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4.14-30). The growing opposition of the Jewish religious leaders Jesus' ministry bore out Simeon's words. On several occasions Jesus himself told his disciples that suffering and death were his destiny (cf. Luke 9.21-23, 44-45, 18.31-34), and while the disciples did not grasp this truth at the time, and even resisted it, Jesus now reminds them that this is what he told them. It is only now, after his resurrection, that everything the prophets had said about the Messiah falls into place. From this point on, the disciples will turn to the Old Testament prophecies to prove the Jesus was the promised Messiah, and that all that happened to him was inevitable.

Secondly, Luke's account portrays Jesus explaining that Old Testament prophecy foretells the proclamation of the gospel to all nations:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

(Luke 24:46-48).

The idea that the Messiah's message of repentance and forgiveness of sins must be proclaimed to all nations – not just to the Jews – was, if anything, harder for first-century Jews to understand and accept than the prophecies that the Messiah was to suffer and die. But it's there right at the beginning of Luke's gospel, when the angel tells the shepherds,

“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”

(Luke 2.10),

and at the start of Jesus' ministry, when he refers to God's mercy towards the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4.24-27). In fact, of course, God's promise that the Jewish Messiah would be for everyone is stated way back, in the covenant with Abraham:

“I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”

(Genesis 12.3).

The later prophets affirm this same promise of salvation and blessing for all nations. Second Isaiah says,

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations”

(Isaiah 42:1),

and Haggai describes the Messiah as

the treasure of all nations

(Haggai 2.7).

In the light of this fact, the Jesus' commission to the apostles comes as no new revelation, but as an outworking of the Old Testament prophecies and the suffering of the Messiah. Luke, in fact, records the “Great Commission”, as more of a firm promise, a certainty, than a command: and not once, but twice (Luke 24.47; Acts 1.8).

In order for the gospel to be proclaimed to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem, the disciples must be empowered by the Holy Spirit, which again the Old Testament prophets foretold. We read in First Isaiah that,

The palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted;
the hill and the watch-tower will become dens for ever,
the joy of wild asses, a pasture for flocks;
until a spirit from on high is poured out on us,
and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

(Isaiah 32.14-15),

while Second Isaiah says,

I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring

(Isaiah 44.3),

Third Isaiah,

My spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, from now on and for ever

(Isaiah 59.21).

and Ezekiel says,

I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God.

(Ezekiel 39:29).

The promise of the Holy Spirit was reiterated by Luke in his account of John the Baptist, who contrasted his baptism with water to the Messiah's baptism with the Spirit (cf. Luke 3:16), and Jesus also spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit:

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

(Luke 11.13),

and

When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say

(Luke 12.12).

We should also note that, while Jesus commanded the disciples to be His witnesses, he also commanded them to witness only in the power that he would provide. The one who commands is the one who enables.

Exhibit Three: The change in the disciples

Finally, in Luke's gospel, Jesus leads the disciples out of Jerusalem to Bethany, where, as he lifts His hands in blessing, he "withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven". (Luke does a complete rewrite of this scene at the beginning of *The Acts of the Apostles*.) Now the disciples, who were devastated by the death of Jesus and hiding themselves start praising God in public, and not only in public but in the temple, the very heart of Judaism. Later, we know, they start to share Jesus message of repentance and forgiveness, and within a single generation, they have established Churches, "communities of the Lord", all the way from Jerusalem to Rome.

Honestly? I don't know what to believe about those days following the crucifixion of Jesus. Maybe I've been taught to think too critically about the Bible, or maybe I'm too influenced by

scientific method, or both; but I don't know what experience the disciples had that made them describe it as "resurrection", with all the ambiguities about the risen Christ's body being both tangible and yet able to pass through locked doors. I wonder sometimes, if I'd been there, how I might have written about it, in 21st century, post-Enlightenment, post-Modern terms...?

What I do believe is that repentance and forgiveness constitute the only process by which we fallible and fault-filled human beings have ever – and can ever – find real, lasting *shalom* with ourselves and with one another. Nothing in my studies of Biblical criticism, post-Enlightenment or post-Modern philosophy, has shaken my conviction that repentance and forgiveness are Good News for all the nations.

What do people outside the Church see when they look at us – if, indeed, they ever do? That depends on our behaviour, and our behaviour depends on how much we really believe in repentance and forgiveness: first, our own repentance and our own forgiveness, then in the possibility of repentance and forgiveness we hold out to others.

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