

OPEN MINDS, BURNING HEARTS

Journeying through Luke's Gospel: V. Emmaus

Text: Luke 24:13-35

1. The Wider Context: Journeys, Tables and the Holy City

Emmaus: rival Emmauses vie for the attention to pilgrims and tourists; not even all the ancient manuscripts of Luke agree as to its distance from Jerusalem: sixty stadia (about 7.5 miles), or 160 stadia (about 19.5 miles).

Appropriate, because in a profound sense Emmaus can be anywhere: e.g. painting below by an Anonymous American Artist, *Christ on the Road to Emmaus* (c. 1725/1730; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC: open access image): ordinary landscape.



Emmaus story brings together important Lucan motifs:

- i) journey as transformative;
- ii) meal as context for salvation;
- iii) centrality of Jerusalem.

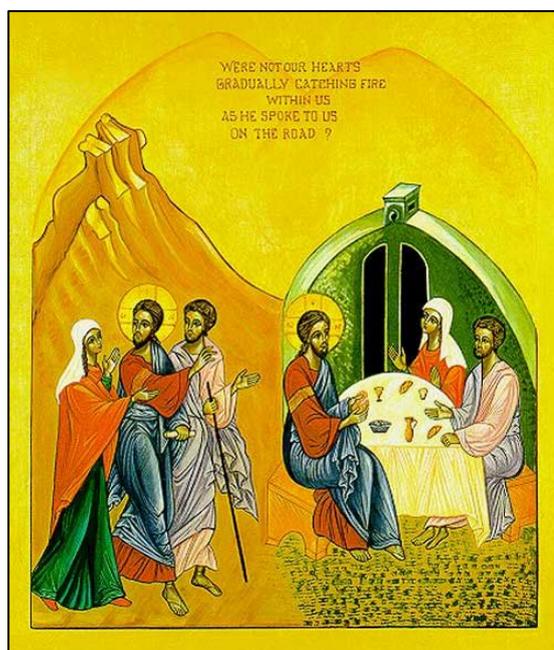
Three complementary approaches to the Emmaus story:

- a) as resurrection story;
- b) as story of bereavement;
- c) as a liturgical encounter.

2. "Jesus Himself Came Near": Emmaus as Resurrection Story

- 1) Luke's distinctive version of a resurrection appearance story.
- 2) Our earliest NT interpretation of what the resurrection means is in 1 Corinthians 15 (resurrection body is a *sōma pneumatikon*, a 'spiritual body' or a 'spirit-filled body', or a 'spirit-animated body': both 'bodily' and 'spiritual').
- 3) Paul struggles to describe this in conceptual language; the Gospels struggle to describe this in story, in narrative:
 - a) Similar but different; something prevents the disciples from recognizing him;
 - b) Lens of the resurrection makes everything look different, including the Old Testament (fulfilment in sense of fuller meaning); Moses and the prophets, particularly stories of Moses and Elijah, have given a language; but these now look very different in the light of what has happened;
 - c) 'Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him' (Luke 24:31 NRSV: not 'saw' him, but 'recognized him'): a reversal of Eden ('and their eyes were opened, and they recognized that they were naked', Gen 3:7).

3. “Their Eyes Were Kept from Recognizing Him”: Emmaus as Bereavement



- 1) On another level, there is a Lucan realism about this story: two disciples are bereaved, and therefore not seeing clearly, because the world is dislocated.
- 2) They are going over and over again the traumatic events of the death of their friend, their loved one, their Master (they are conversing, discussing; the verb Luke uses gives us our word "homily").
- 3) They cannot see clearly (and therefore cannot recognize Jesus).
- 4) Jesus allows them to tell their story.
- 5) Only then does he remind them of Moses and the prophets, opening them up in a new way, picking up the fragments of their shattered dreams, and putting them back together in a new configuration.
- 6) This provokes a gradual dawning for them that something has changed.

4. “Then Their Eyes were Opened”: Emmaus as Liturgy

But this story has also been shaped by the early church’s Eucharistic liturgy:

- 1) Its primary purpose may well be to teach later generations of Christians that the real, tangible presence of the risen Lord is as accessible to later generations of Christians as to those who first encountered him at the first Easter.
- 2) Shape of story is liturgical shape, meditating on Scriptures, culminating in the breaking of the bread.

Two Caravaggios:



Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus* (1601; National Gallery, London: in public domain): commissioned while Caravaggio was finishing off his canvases for S. Maria del Popolo, Rome (*Crucifixion of St Peter* and *Conversion of St Paul*).

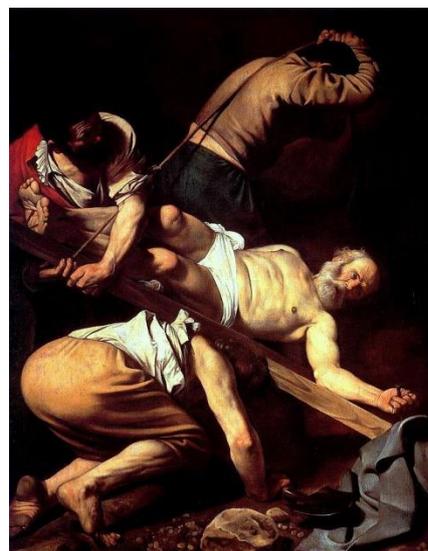
1) Ordinary character of the meal (these are ordinary people in a Roman tavern).

2) Youthful, unbearded figure of

Christ distinguished from rough disciples (Caravaggio's realistic way of presenting a 'risen body').

3) identity of two disciples unclear (Cleopas on left? Other disciple of right? Striking similarity to Peter in Caravaggio's *Crucifixion of St Peter*, opposite).

4) Open table: participation of viewer (particularly Eucharistic).



Caravaggio, *Crucifixion of St Peter* (1601; Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome: in public domain)

Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus* (1606, Milan: in public domain): painted after Caravaggio killed a man and was in flight (a more tender, redemptive Christ?).



5. After Emmaus: The Ongoing Story

Brings us full circle: Jesus, blessing the disciples as he ascends (Luke 24:50-53), completes truncated priestly blessing of Zechariah at beginning of Gospel.

This PDF comes from the CBCEW Scripture Working Group, based on work by Dr Ian Boxall, available from <http://www.cbcew.org.uk/bible-studies>