

Emmaus

Lewis is six, and he doesn't like to think about any kind of future that is unfamiliar. He knows what he likes, he knows what he doesn't like. And he knows how to communicate both his pleasure and displeasure. His displeasure is aroused by the possibility of walking an unforeseeable distance, especially when he is tired.

So, when it was still getting dark before 7pm, one evening, we go to a park in Ely. He has had his long day, and he has just learned that he is about to embark upon a walk. And so he expresses his displeasure.

Two disciples have had a long day. They had committed their lives to a Messiah. They had followed him into the city of Jerusalem. They thought that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. But like all failed Messiah's, he and his followers discovered too late, that his fate lay in the form of a gruesome death. Jesus was to be punished in precisely the way that every challenge to Roman rule was punished: crucifixion. For those who had followed Jesus, all hopes had come to an end. Jesus of Nazareth was dead. And with him died the hope for all Israel.

With Jesus, the hope of Israel was unfulfilled. Israel was still in exile, oppressed and downtrodden.

With Jesus, the promises of the prophets were broken. The Servant, the Messiah who was to usher in a new era, and era of justice and righteousness and forgiveness, this Jesus was dead. And with him died the promises of the prophets.

With Jesus, died the hope of justice. He was put to death by a Roman legal system and a Jewish religious system, that could not cope justly with this man. Everyone knew that his death was unjust, even one who was crucified next to him. But with Jesus died the hope of justice.

And these two disciples, walking back from Jerusalem, were walking into a dark world. Not just because it was getting late, but because it was a world in which God himself had been defeated, righteousness had not prevailed, and the Kingdom of God was a conquered Kingdom. What on earth would you have left to talk about if you were one of those two disciples? Like Lewis, they are walking into the darkness, expressing their displeasure at the threat of the future that stretches out before them.

But there was a bizarre twist to their mood. There have been rumours that the body of this Messiah has gone missing. Some women have been going around saying that they have had visions of angels, and that this Jesus is alive. And the rumours have been confirmed to the extent that the body is actually missing. What are you supposed to do with that? It had not been a good day for these disillusioned ex-disciples. You might imagine how lively and colourful the conversation might be.

And as they are rambling along, a stranger pitches up alongside them, and asks them what all the fuss is about. So they tell him the story. So this stranger takes them on a whistle stop journey through the Jewish scriptures, through Moses and the Prophets – unfolding the pattern of how – in order for any Messiah to be Messiah, they must endure suffering of the worst sort imaginable. The magnitude of suffering encountered by this Messiah was not a denial of his Messiahship, but the proof of it! Suffering and vindication has always been the way that God has been at work in the people Israel. When faithful Israel is narrowed down to one solitary

Messiah, then it is inevitable that that one solitary Messiah – in harmony with the Scriptures – will undergo the worst suffering, a baptism of fire, before being glorified.

And this stranger opens the Scriptures to them in a way that sets their hearts ablaze. And these disciples don't want to let him go, they want him to stay with them and eat with them. And, surprisingly, wherever it was they were eating, this stranger is audacious enough to assume the role of the host. And he takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it. And right there, at the moment when he breaks the bread – the penny drops.

Where's he gone? Er ... So up they get, and hurry back to Jerusalem. I often wonder why it was in the breaking of bread that their eyes were open. And it seems to me that we are here brought right the way back to the beginning of the Bible.

This is not the first time that Luke has drawn us back to Adam and Eve. Unlike Matthew, who traces the family tree only as far back as Abraham, the father of the Jews. Luke, traces the family tree back as far as Adam, suggesting that Jesus has come not only for the Jews but for the entire human race. Something similar happens here.

The very first meal mentioned in Scripture is the moment when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. The direct result is new and unwelcome knowledge. The eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” (Gen 3:7)

Now this couple of disciples, Cleopas and his companion (probably his wife, one of the many Marys in the Gospel story) are at table and confronted with a new and deeply welcome knowledge: their eyes were opened and they recognised him. This, Luke is saying, is the ultimate redemption – this is the meal which signifies that the long exile of the human race, not just of Israel, but the long exile of the human race is over at last. This is the start of the new creation. This is why repentance and forgiveness of sins, traditionally required only of Israel, are now to be announced to all the nations.

And if Luke really means this to be the 8th meal in the gospel, then there is a numerical scheme to reinforce the same point. This is the first day of the new week! This resurrection, is not some quiet little blip in the course of the human race. This is a foundational event for the whole of humanity – it affects us all. It has universal significance.

That's why some of the songs that I enjoyed as a young Christian celebrate this as the victory of Jesus: Jesus, we celebrate your victory – not a hint of irony in the line, “and in his presence, our problems disappear”... er ... excuse me ... in his presence our problems disappear. Well. Forgive me if I think that's load of huey.

But then, come on – for the last two thousand years, human beings have still have this awful habit of dying. Wars have not ceased to the ends of the earth. And despite the apparent progress of technology and civilisation, human suffering has been extended, not diminished. The darkness has not been dispelled – it has prevailed. And this is not simply someone with a gloomy disposition putting a bad spin on things. Anyone who knows what is happening in this world, knows that it is a horrible place, where suffering continues, injustice remains, and the darkness is not going away.

Really, what is so special about the resurrection? Back to Lewis, embarking upon his walk in the dark – as these two disciples embark upon their walk in the dark. When Lewis got out

there, on his journey – there was a point at which his eyes were opened. It was still dark, and he was still walking, but this became a ‘dark adventure’. The whole point of the walk was for him to be with his family, on an adventure. And then the walk was not a slog, and the darkness was not as scary. The journey would not be endless.

In the world of the resurrection, the darkness is still there. And we must enter it. But we do not enter it alone, or forgotten, or abandoned. We enter it with the one who has been through the darkness and out the other side. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

In the world of the resurrection, we face the probability of massive ecological breakdown, and an increasing likelihood that this will mark the end of civilisation as we know it. Enormous and impossible political changes need to be achieved, if we are to avoid this.

In the world of the resurrection, we face massive economic injustice. The existence of the world bank and its action across the globe serve largely to perpetuate a situation where wealthy continue to benefit from keeping poorer nations and their people’s trapped in inescapable cycles of debt.

Slave trade. With very few exceptions (exceptions which include the easter eggs handed out in church this morning), the chocolate eggs that many have eaten today have been produced by slaves. Slaves, being treated with all the horror we imagine, slaves who exist to feed our luxury. And the political will to change this horror is non-existent.

In the world of the resurrection, family breakdown, and the social and personal breakdown that inevitably follow, are as dark as ever they were. And that is something I have tasted first hand. And there is no magic wand to change people’s lives to stop this.

Teaching in Bristol to students who were upbeat, and shook their heads because they didn’t want to hear about things that were depressing. But Christianity that does not face the darkness is worthless. Lewis looks forward to his dark adventure.

And this adventure, this advent – has an impact on all humanity. The darkness of our world cannot be denied, cannot be dispelled, but it can be entered. Because in entering the darkness, and the injustice, and the unfairness and the depressing realities, we enter it in the name of, in the strength of and following the path of the Jesus who has defeated death.

Death is still there, but it does not have the final word – and that is our hope.

Darkness and death cast long shadows over our world and over our lives, but on the strength of the resurrection we leap into the dark unknown. Well, we might tip toe, and falter, and limp our way in. but because of the resurrection, our churches are called lampstands from where the light of Christ shines, and the glory of the risen Christ is reflected from the faces of those who worship him.

We can’t dispel the darkness. That’s not our job – but we enter into it, meet Jesus there, and see what difference His light makes to our lives, to our church, and to our world.