

**SERMON FOR EASTER 3: 14 APRIL 2024 AT LITTLE LANGFORD (Steeple Langford still closed) (based on Luke 24: 36b-48)**

**Spirit and body - transformed.**

Imagine a Greek and a Jew meeting in a cafe somewhere in first century Judea. They discuss what happens after death. The Greek maintains that the physical and the spiritual elements of our bodies are separate; the one visible, the other invisible. Only the spiritual, invisible element continues after death. The Jew believes that our bodies, as God's creation, are animated by his breath. For the Jew, flesh and spirit are one, an indivisible union of body and soul. It was against a background of this sort of metaphysical debate, somewhat simplified in this imaginary encounter, that Luke would have been writing, some 50 years or so after Christ's death. And it is very much at the heart of the passage we have heard today.

Immediately before it, two disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and when they got there, he broke bread with them. The friends acknowledged that all the rumours they had heard must be true: "He is risen indeed!". They then rushed off back to Jerusalem to tell the 'eleven', ie the apostles minus Judas. Let us pause a moment to consider what it is they believed to be true at that stage by asking ourselves why Jesus laboured the point by suddenly appearing among them in the room in Jerusalem. Wasn't the Emmaus episode proof enough? We need perhaps to remember that these people had lost a great friend, someone they looked up to and were prepared to follow, even if it meant giving up their livelihoods. Jesus' was a life cut very short, and seeing him again might have led them to look forward to a resumption of how things were. Jesus could well have sensed a continuing lack of understanding. However, the Jesus who had first called them to follow him had not yet been scarred by crucifixion; now, there was something different about his presence among them. When he refers to words he spoke "while he was still with [them]", there is the implication that he is no longer with them in quite the same way. Indeed, in future, being with the disciples would come to mean something entirely different. Jesus' persistence is necessary to secure the next stage of his call to those he had first addressed after a futile night's fishing. Then, they had been promised that they would become fishers of men. Now, the metaphor needed to be translated into real life, with the ambitious task of carrying the message of salvation from Jerusalem to all nations.

So Jesus' mission must continue through the faithful. But to be prepared for that, the disciples had first of all to believe that this risen Jesus really had stood among them. They had to grasp the reality of the risen Christ, not as a ghost, nor a vision, nor a resuscitated corpse. Jesus therefore showed them his hands and feet and suggested they touch him. In order to dispel any remaining disbelief, he asked them if they had anything to eat, and in front of them, he ate broiled fish. Luke's version of Christ's reappearances is the most physical - the disciples had to be convinced in order to become reliable and credible witnesses.

Secondly, their lack of comprehension as to the significance of his resurrection had to be overcome. They needed to understand that Jesus, though despised and humiliated at the end of his earthly life, was exalted before God. And Jesus achieved that through opening "their minds to understand the scriptures". Luke is at pains to demonstrate that Christ's suffering, death and resurrection came in fulfilment of the Jewish scriptures, those very writings that pointed to the coming of a Messiah, the anointed one and promised deliverer of the Jewish nation.

All of which makes us think back to hints that Jesus had become both the same person his disciples had followed, and yet different, no longer simply a human being. For example, there was his disappearance from the room in Emmaus, and sudden reappearance in the room in Jerusalem. Jesus had not just died and come back to life, but he had been glorified, transformed. Paul, in chapter 15 of his first letter to the Corinthians, tried to explain that belief in Christ's resurrection gives hope that after death, we shall go through a similar change. For Christ, it happened immediately; for us the timing is less certain - will it be at the point of death? or when the world is created anew at the second coming - we cannot know.

There are some difficult concepts in the reading from Luke, and for many today, it may raise more questions than it answers. There is not just the tricky one, pondered over by Greeks, Jews and many others, about how we might experience the afterlife - in some kind of physical body or only in spirit? We might also ask how we can be sure that Luke's Gospel was not written in a way that deliberately created a link with, and an apparent fulfilment, of the prophets and scriptures. We live in an age of easy access to information, not

all of it accurate, and tend to be cautious about what we read. But perhaps we just need to revisit the parts of Luke's passage that ring true. The mix of complex emotions he describes are for me a plausible account of eleven shocked and grieving men as they find themselves facing the inconceivable. The waves of elation, incredulity, amazement and joy are entirely consistent with the behaviour of people who had had no hope of seeing again someone they dearly loved. And I for one do not doubt that the human and divine were present in Jesus as he went about his ministry: spirit and body indivisible, but transformed at death, when the divine came to the fore.

So the Greek view or the Jewish one? - I'm not sure it matters. If, as God's creation, we believe that we have his breath, his spirit within us, then death is not an end but a beginning, comforting hope for all of us.

In the name of Christ, amen.