

The Second Easter Reflection for week of 3 May April 2020:

Rembrandt 'The Supper at Emmaus' c.1628

Reflection

Rembrandt depicted the theme of Christ's post resurrection appearance at Emmaus many times. The painting 'The Supper at Emmaus', shown below, appears much more dramatic than his later work of the same name dating from 1648.¹ Rembrandt's ongoing study of chiaroscuro was particularly apparent in works dating from the late 1620s and here it is put to dramatic effect in the pale yellow-grey colours and the way the light falls which conveys the shock on the face of Jesus' travelling companion as the identity of their guest is



revealed. The form of the second traveller, kneeling down with face covered, may be detected in

¹ <https://www.musee-jacquemart-andre.com/en/oeuvres/supper-emmaus> and https://www.wga.hu/html_m/r/rembrand/13biblic/39newtes.html

the shadows of the foreground, whilst in the background we see someone working, seemingly oblivious to the events taking place round the table.

The narrative inspiring Rembrandt's painting comes from the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel. Jesus had been walking and talking with two disciples, but at this stage, Cleopas and his unnamed companion, remain unaware of Jesus' true identity. Three days have passed since Jesus had been crucified. As they walk along, the friends begin to talk about what had happened in Jerusalem. Their disappointment was palpable for they had hoped that Jesus would 'redeem Israel': they had hoped that Jesus would be the one to set the Jewish people free from Roman oppression and in so doing, open the way for their spiritual heritage to be restored. Yet now their hopes had been dashed for, as Luke records, the prophet who had been so 'powerful in word and deed' had been crucified. Coupled with this, they had just heard news that when some women had gone to Jesus' tomb earlier that morning, they had found it empty. As Jesus is drawn into the conversation it is noteworthy that Jesus does not enter into debate about whether or not the tomb was empty, rather Jesus engages with them by explaining how the scriptures point to Christ's suffering, death and resurrection: Luke records 'Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets he [Christ] interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things written concerning himself' (Luke 24:27). It is only when they arrive in Emmaus in the evening and sat down to eat, that his companions suddenly realised that the stranger who had been with them was Jesus. Luke records that it was as Jesus broke the bread, that their eyes were opened and they realised they were in the presence of the risen Christ (Luke 24:31).

Rembrandt captures the look of utter astonishment on the friend's face. The light behind Christ falls on the startled face of one of the men who lean back in utter amazement. If you

look through the evening gloom of the foreground, the second traveller, can be seen kneeling down, possibly terrified, and peering up at the face of the risen Christ.

Suddenly the penny had dropped: their hearts had been warmed as Jesus had explained scripture. Their excitement was such that they abandoned their meal and decided to dash back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples that the Lord had risen (Luke 24: 34).

So what might we deduce from this?

First, that the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ should be understood within the context of scripture. Whilst it is true that the Christian faith is necessarily a response to an encounter with the risen Christ, the Emmaus story underlines the point that faith in the risen Christ is to be grounded in an understanding of how the Old Testament points to Christ and is fulfilled in Christ. It follows that such understanding necessitates a careful and thorough study of scripture, not least of the Old Testament, so that experiential faith (what one might think of as 'the faith of the heart') grows alongside an intellectual understanding of how God has spoken and proved himself faithful through the historic testimony of scripture. The Gospels are clear that Jesus saw himself as fulfilling the Old Testament.² They show that both before and after his death and resurrection Jesus put a great deal of emphasis on teaching how the Old Testament provided the key to understanding the significance of his suffering, death and resurrection. It is this dual understanding of heart and head that fosters faith that is both efficacious spiritually and credible intellectually.

Second, according to the Gospel accounts, Christ chooses to come alongside ordinary people in ordinary places. Rembrandt captures this perfectly in his painting: Christ makes

² For example Luke 4:21; Luke 24:44-5.

himself known at the kitchen table; the cloth haversack is hung on the wall and the servant carries on their work in the background. It is worth noting that the risen Christ did not set out to present himself as a celebrity, neither did he seek to justify himself to the powerful religious and political leaders who had put him to death. Rather Christ's concern was to appear to a couple of 'minor' disciples as they worked through their grief and sorrow. The extraordinary encounter took place in the most ordinary of settings. Furthermore the disciples Christ drew near to on this occasion did not even come from the twelve; indeed only Cleopas was named. Yet time and time again we see in the Gospels that ordinary settings and ordinary people tend to be the favoured sphere of God's interest and action. Perhaps in this strange phase of life when we find ourselves at home or otherwise isolated, when we have much to carry in our hearts, we should remember that Christ draws alongside the humble, prompting our hearts and minds to draw near to him.

Prayer

God of glory, by the raising of your Son, You have broken the chains of death and hell: fill your church with faith and hope; for a new day has dawned and the way to life stands open in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Listening suggestions (available via You Tube)

Vaughan Williams, 'Rise heart, thy Lord is risen' (See You Tube under 'Five mystical songs')
Hieronymus Praetorius, 'Mane nobiscum Domine'
Taize Chants, for example 'Stay with me'