CTBI conference

Christianity: continuity, presence and conflict

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Bible study 3 – Continuity: from Jerusalem to Emmaus

Over the last couple of weeks we have been 'remembering' quite a lot. Holy Week and the Easter season invite us both to remember the events of Jesus' passion and also, particularly in the context of remembering his Last Supper, specifically to reflect on the act of remembrance. 'Do this, we are told, in memory of me', as Jesus breaks the bread and pours the wine. And of course our Christian liturgy and worship here owe much to the Jewish commemoration of the Passover, to which remembering God's Exodus liberation from Egypt is fundamental. (I have sometimes pointed out that the first substantial lawcode in the Hebrew Code focuses on the need for remembering the Exodus: so we can legitimately say that the legal framework of the Jewish tradition is founded on the act of remembering).

For both Christians and Jews such remembering is not simply an archaeological activity, remembering rather invites us to collapse the normal boundaries of time, bringing the past into the present and joining them together. We can all instinctively understand, I think, how remembering is closely allied to the third theme of the title of this conference: continuity.

Remembering can however be dangerous. Included on the sheet which was given out is the short but incredibly powerful lament of Jesus over Jerusalem which comes from Luke 19. And coming into sight of the city Jesus wept over it….

I have also put on the sheet one of the iconic views of Jerusalem – the view through the plain west window of the church of the Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives, which commemorates – remembers – that event. What is however rarely noticed is that the passage also alludes to another weeping over Jerusalem, that of Psalm 137, in which remembrance and not forgetting play a central role.

You will recall how Psalm 137 begins: by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. But the passionate remembering of Jerusalem leads to another darker form of remembering, when the psalmist makes the imprecation 'Remember O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall'. It is interesting isn't it that the Edomites, in tradition, Esau's descendants, whom we met in Genesis 33, now make this very different appearance in Israel's story. But the awful conclusion of the psalm goes further still as the psalmist eventually addresses the Babylonians and exults: 'Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.'

In Jesus' lament over Jerusalem that same word 'dash', rare in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, makes a reappearance, only now it is Jerusalem's own children that are to suffer that fate. Over the years I have come back many times to reflect on this strange congruence. I have come to believe that Jesus' words in Luke 19 are there as a salutary warning that the kind of love – and remembering - that leads to the degree of hate expressed in Psalm 137 is destructive and dangerous – but ultimately most destructive to

the party who is doing the hating. The curses of Psalm 137, Luke seems to be suggesting, falls back on those who are doing the cursing.

What does this mean for this city, holy to three world faiths, which has so often been loved so hatefully? Jerusalem can indeed sometimes feel like it is a city of too much remembering. I once described Jerusalem as a sacrament of what it means to be human. By that I mean that Jerusalem shows up visibly and physically the best and the worst of the human condition.

On the one hand it is a visible symbol of our longing, our highest and best desires, our love of beauty and our desire to worship God. But it is also a powerful reminder of how this best can go so tragically wrong – precisely because we find it so difficult to love without also seeking to possess. Jerusalem is the place where this conundrum is squeezed into a sort of prism, so that it can be viewed in sharp focus. And there is a mysterious way in which Jerusalem does not simply unveil these realities about the human condition but also, I believe, challenges us at the same time to address them – to truly become the human beings God created us to be, in God's image and likeness, as God's partners in the creation and repairing of our world.

That is what I meant by calling Jerusalem a sacrament. But perhaps before we can discover how this can be, we first need to begin the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

First, where exactly is Emmaus? There are actually four sites in the Holy Land which claim to be the site of this village where Jesus broke bread with Cleopas and his friend. I've always regarded that fact as one of God's glorious ironies, a divinely inspired parable of the truth that a holy place can only really be holy if it doesn't seek to make an absolute claim for itself, if it becomes merely a pointer on the road rather than a goal in itself. The very multiplicity of Emmauses somehow helps to preserve them to stand as appropriate witnesses to the Risen Jesus, who comes transient and unexpected to two grief stricken travellers.

Normally holy places are not good symbols of transience, by their very nature they tend to become permanent places where we can hold onto God at our leisure and not allow him to disappear inconveniently half way through a meal. And yet there are four Emmauses each of which has to acknowledge the possible validity of each other's claims, none of which can indisputably maintain that it is THE place.

On Easter Monday in 1975, I walked with a group of fellow students from the Ecole Biblique where I was studying in Jerusalem to all four. I sometimes reflect these days that the walk which we took would no longer be possible – at various points we would hit the separation wall, or boundaries, or security considerations which would prevent us. That day in 1975 we started before dawn and began by walking 8 miles north of Jerusalem to Qubeibeh, Franciscan Emmaus – where the rituals take place.

'Mane nobiscum Domine' - 'Stay with us Lord for it is towards evening and the day is far spent' was the urgent inscription over the gate.

We paused there for a short while and said a prayer, honouring the intentions of the pilgrims and the dedication of the Franciscan custodians who had given their lives to cherishing the place: but we also wondered whether Jesus would have felt comfortable eating his meal in this enormous church.

On we went, turning now towards the west of the city, striding across the hills, till now four miles west of Jerusalem we spotted below us, Amatza, the Emmaus of Pere Benoit our revered teacher at the Ecole Biblique. Ingeniously Pere Benoit has argued that the 8 miles of the journey to which Luke's Gospel refers, means 4 miles there and 4 miles back: and the name Amatza sounds almost right. But these days Amatza is only a few stones by the side of the highway whizzing between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv – we did not feel comfortable sitting down to share a meal there.

On we went, further west, until eventually 8 miles west of Jerusalem we arrived at Abu Ghosh, so-called Crusader Emmaus, where the Crusaders built a Romanesque church with the most beautiful acoustics. I expect it may be different these days, but that day in 1975 the church was locked and rather desolate, because it belonged to the French Archaeological mission, and without having made a prior appointment we were not able to get in. That's not so convenient when one is walking to remember the story of a divine traveller who insists on turning up unexpectedly and disappearing just when we have got things arranged.

So on we walked again – striding through the woods and then down to the plain till we came to our fourth Emmaus. There was a great Jewish-Hellenistic city of that name, Emmaus Nicopolis, which lay 20 miles to the west of Jerusalem. Some of the manuscripts of Luke's Gospel seem to suggest that this was indeed the distance and, partly on that basis, it was the favoured location for Emmaus during the Byzantine era. There was an Arab village there, called Imwas, sounding so very similar. It was not however marked on the maps that we were carrying with us. Fortunately some of our number knew where to go and eventually footsore and thirsty we found ourselves standing by the baptistry in the ruins of the Byzantine church of Emmaus/Imwas.

After a pause and a prayer there we carried on the last leg of our journey – just a couple of miles down the road to the Trappist monastery at Latrun – which makes no claim to be the actual Emmaus itself but, perhaps through its warm hospitality and provision of a sumptuous late lunch for our group of weary travellers, maybe incarnated the spirit of Emmaus for us most of all that day.

But that final Emmaus, Imwas, that was in a sense the culmination of our pilgrimage, is a place that haunts me still. In this reflection which focuses on remembering and continuity its tale needs to be told.

The story of Imwas, like its neighbouring villages Beit Nuba and Yalu, has a particular poignancy even among the tragedies suffered by many different people in the Middle East. The three villages were located on a strip of land called the Latrun Salient that before 1967 was Jordanian territory, but which jutted out like an exposed finger pointing into the heart of Israel. Almost the first thing that happened after the Israeli conquest in June of that year was the mass deportation of all the inhabitants of the villages and the systematic and complete levelling of their homes. The only building left standing, I believe, was those ruins of the Byzantine church where we paused that Easter Monday 8 years later.

The area where the village had been was then planted with trees and became officially known as Canada Park. Clearly there have been, in a sense, worse atrocities committed by both Israelis and Arabs: few if any of the inhabitants were killed – most ended up as refugees on the other side of the river Jordan. Having later lived in Lebanon and Syria

during the Lebanese civil war, I am also very conscious that Imwas' story may not in one sense rate very highly on the wider Middle Eastern atrocity meter – for example another memory that haunts me is driving in spring 1982 between Aleppo and Damascus and being diverted from the normal route which took one through the city of Hama.

Was it 10,000 or 20,000 people who were being slaughtered in Hama as my husband and I gazed at the city in the distance? But what is particularly memorable about the story of Imwas is the concerted determination to destroy even the memory of the place and its sister villages.

Since July 1967, maps and guidebooks printed in Israel consistently refuse to indicate that there were ever three villages here and an enquiry to an Israeli official about Imwas will elicit the response: "it does not exist – you mean Canada Park". Perhaps I can guess at the good political or military reasons for the decision to eradicate all memory of these places but there has always seemed to me to be something peculiarly bitter about this rape of the memory of Imwas, for the Emmaus story has as part of its message the wisdom that the resurrection can only be properly experienced when our memories are explored and begin to be healed. Resurrection does not come about when wounds are superficially sutured or ignored – either for the people of Imwas or for us.

To return to the language of Luke 24: 'We had hoped that he was to be the one to redeem Israel', said Cleopas to their unexpected travelling companion, 'we have suffered grief and pain.' So we may have heard a story of a missing body and an empty tomb but we cannot grasp its significance for us. But then as the Gospel puts it 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.' In other words, Jesus leads them to revisit, remember and then come to a deeper understanding of all their and their people's story. And it is only when they had begun to grasp why the Cross had happened that the Cross was almost imperceptibly transformed into resurrection. It is, I feel though, something of a spiral process: if resurrection requires remembering then perhaps also we might suggest that resurrection might lead to the healing and transformation of those memories.

I am not sure whether there is a deep linguistic link, or it is a fortuitous accident, but in English at least the word 'remember' can be linked to 'member', the different parts or people that make a group or a community – or even the different limbs of our body. And just as we can talk about 'dis-membering' something – breaking it apart – so a number of commentators suggest that the act of 're-membering' constitutes pulling things together once again and making them whole. If this is the case then what is the relationship between remembering the past and making our communities whole?

One of the joys of working at the World Council of Churches is that I learn from the insights of my colleagues of different churches or different countries. In this case I was having a discussion about Emmaus with a German colleague Martin Robra, relating to the fact that the WCC is planning a pilgrimage of justice and peace. Martin was telling me of the work of the German scholar John Baptist Metz, who looks at how the writings of the New Testament are informed by the political context of the period.

Apparently at some point in the decades before Jesus' ministry the town of Emmaus – the one that is today called Imwas - had been deliberately depopulated by the Roman army and its people taken away into slavery. Metz argues that Luke, in telling us the story of

Jesus on the road to Emmaus is very aware of this and that, in his discussion about suffering with his fellow travellers, Jesus was rescuing the memory of the victims. In inviting us to remember his passion, Jesus invites us to remember all other passions and victims, and thus lifts them up and potentially enables them too to become part of the resurrection.

'Resurrection' of course is a word has sometimes got misused. There is certain form of pop religious psychology that uses the word to describe anything that could remotely sound like a change for the better. And so it is at this point that we need our Christian faith's scandal of the particular; our insistence on a link with something specific happening at a particular place and a particular time. Strangely enough, I find holy places helpful here for they witness to particularity and sometimes all too obviously to its scandal. The road to Emmaus speaks deeply of particularity; for it seems to me that those travellers really journeyed through the Old Testament, through the history of a chosen people and at the end of their exploring began to know it properly for the first time.

That is a pattern which recurs several times in Luke's writings, the Gospel and Acts: I think that deeply embedded in Luke's theology is the affirmation that we need to take seriously and engage with the past, before our eyes can be opened and we can see the potentialities of a new and transformed future. It is expressed in Luke's story of Simeon greeting the infant Jesus in the Temple; it is expressed too in the accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts, especially as it is retold in Acts 26. Notice how Paul says here, in language that resonates with the Emmaus road conversation, that he has testified to what 'the prophets and Moses said would take place'… and that it is from this that resurrection can be experienced – both for 'our people and the Gentiles'. There is continuity – and there is discontinuity too.

But there is one final thing to notice about the Emmaus story before I conclude. As the travellers retell their experience 'they told how the Lord had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread'. Resurrection is bound up with remembering the special and the particular, with anamnesis of events which are the same as they had always been yet have also somehow undergone a sea-change. There is continuity – and there is discontinuity too. There had been something very particular, very special about the table fellowship that Jesus had shared with his disciples in the days of his earthly ministry, that bread asked daily from the Father and eaten together by a small and itinerant group.

It was no accident therefore that Cleopas remembered and recognised the Risen Lord just as he blessed and broke the bread. It is also no accident that, just as we have done this morning, throughout the centuries the Christian church has celebrated the Resurrection and made it our own through the breaking of bread.

In my bible studies I have tried to draw threads to encourage us to think about issues in the Middle East today – and especially the situation of Middle Eastern Christians. As I suggested at the end of last night's bible study by quoting Rowan's words: "it is a kind of Gnosticism, a kind of cutting loose from history if we say that the presence of our brothers and sisters in the land of Our Lord does not matter to us". Not that I necessarily think that those brothers and sisters are perfect. Far from it. Indeed one of the most unhelpful things Western Christians can sometimes do is to project onto our Middle Eastern Christian brothers and sisters unrealistic expectations and hopes.

In the Syria workshop held at the conference, Nadim, our leader, was justifiably critical of some of the current Christian leadership in the region: Christianity in the Middle East has been deeply scarred by too many centuries of what is called the millet system, which turned the churches into quasi-political entities. But the Emmaus story tells us of how somebody, Jesus, who we could call a failed Messiah, certainly failed in terms of his fellow travellers expectations, offers the possibility of resurrection.

I quote loosely here from a wonderful book ‘Gateway to Hope’ written by the Catholic nun Maria Boulding: “Those two travellers on the road to Emmaus, are you and I, the church with all our disappointments and failures travelling down the long road of history. On our way we meet a figure, failed by our standards, who offers us both comfort and challenge, changing our slow hearts into burning ones”.

His last words may be difficult for us to hear – but out of them the future beckons. For what he says is this: ‘You have failed: come into my Easter’.

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