

## **Sermon 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter 2020**

### **Luke 24: 13-35 The Walk to Emmaus**

As some of you may remember, a couple of summers ago I visited the US with my family. When we were in San Francisco, I was really excited to visit Grace Cathedral, which is the Anglican Cathedral in the city. The Cathedral has not one, but two full size labyrinths, one outside the cathedral and this one, inside. The labyrinth is open every day and I was able to quietly walk the labyrinth, following the path right to the very centre and back out again which took quite some time.

Now I should say that a labyrinth is not the same as a maze. A maze has false paths and blind alleys and you can get lost in a maze, as many of us probably have done at Milton or other mazes. But a labyrinth only has one path – you can't get lost and if you have patience you will eventually, by following the path, reach the centre of the labyrinth. Walking a labyrinth, if done prayerfully is a bit like going on a pilgrimage.

Pilgrimages have become more popular recently and you may have seen the recent TV series following a group of celebrities as they made their way from Belgrade to Istanbul. But Pilgrimages were a very important part of medieval Christian faith and spirituality, people went on pilgrimages for all sorts of reasons; as a penance or to seek healing, as well as for far less laudable reasons which we can read about in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. But in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century travelling across Europe to popular pilgrimage sites such as Rome or Jerusalem became much more dangerous due to war and political tensions and so many of the large cathedrals in Europe built labyrinths. Instead of travelling large distances people would journey to their local cathedral and walk the labyrinth, a mini pilgrimage if you like. Many of the labyrinths were destroyed but one famous labyrinth that does remain, is in Chartres cathedral, and the labyrinth that I walked in San Francisco is an exact replica of the one in Chartres.

My experience of walking labyrinths is that they have been times when I was able to see things in new ways, I was able to gain new perspectives literally as the path weaved backwards and forwards on itself, and as I journeyed I encountered Christ, just as the two disciples walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus, in the familiar gospel reading that we have just heard, unexpectedly encountered Christ on their journey.

Now we don't know why they were travelling away from Jerusalem on that Easter Sunday. After all there had been reports from the women and other disciples that the tomb was empty, and that Jesus was alive. Perhaps despite the reports they remained frightened or were even more frightened of the authorities, like the disciples in the Upper Room; perhaps they were returning to their old lives now that Jesus, the person they had hoped would redeem Israel, to save them from Roman oppression was dead. We can only really speculate on their reasons for travelling those 7 miles that day, but there on the road they met a stranger. They simply didn't recognise that it was Jesus, like Mary outside the tomb, they didn't recognise Jesus' resurrected body, the same but somehow transformed.

And I think that it must have taken some courage, especially if they were frightened, to open up to this stranger and to share everything that had been happening. But as they walked, Jesus taught them. Their hearts burned within them, as Jesus explained the scriptures. But even then, they didn't recognise the person speaking. It was only when they were finally sitting down at the table, having reached the village of Emmaus, when Jesus took the bread, blessed it, and broke it, that they finally recognised that the stranger was the risen Christ. But then before they knew it, Jesus had disappeared from their sight. I don't know if they ate their meal – Luke states that 'that same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem,' it sounds as though these two disciples didn't hang around to eat. They quickly retraced their journey back to Jerusalem, to tell the rest of the disciples what had happened on the road and in the breaking of bread

But we live in extraordinary times. We are not even able to visit our local cathedral to walk the labyrinth there – and yes Ely Cathedral does have a labyrinth, just by the West door as you go in, and when we are able to travel freely once more, I would encourage you to visit and to walk the labyrinth. But instead of being able to travel, we have to stay at home and for some of us, that means not going out at all, which I know some are finding incredibly hard. And today, we are not going to be able to share the bread and wine either. The disciples recognised Jesus as he broke the bread, and Christ is present today in the broken bread and wine outpoured, and in and among us gathered together even though we are in our separate homes. Christ is present as Nick takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it, just as Jesus did that day.

We also encounter Christ as we read God's word, because all scripture is God breathed, as St Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy. As we read our Bibles, not only on a Sunday but throughout the rest of the week, we need to pray that as we read and ponder God's word, God would speak to us, just as Jesus spoke to the disciples and explained the scriptures to them on the road to Emmaus. We need to be open to God, which is not so dissimilar to when you walk a labyrinth when you need to be prepared to listen to God and to have your eyes opened. And as well as encountering Christ in bread and wine and in the scriptures, we can also encounter Christ in the stranger, in the person who collects our refuse, the person who delivers our food to our doorstep or to the shops, and in those who are caring for others in the most difficult of circumstances. May we have hearts and eyes that are open so that we may encounter the risen Christ on our journeys through life.