

Sermon for Easter 3

Luke 24: 13-35

A few years ago, while we were on holiday in Liverpool, Caroline and I caught the bus to Anfield Stadium, home of Liverpool Football Club. We got off the bus in front of the Shankly Gates. Above the gates are the words “You’ll never walk alone”, the title of the song sung by Liverpool fans and associated with the club around the world. Wherever the team is playing, the stands will be alive with voices singing, “You’ll never walk alone.”

Originally taken from the musical “Carousel”, the song’s association with the club began when a version by local Liverpool band Gerry and the Pacemakers reached number one in the UK singles chart in 1963. In the musical, the words give comfort after a tragedy. For Liverpool FC they have done the same in the years following the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, when almost a hundred Liverpool fans were crushed to death at Sheffield Wednesday’s Hillsborough Stadium. The song accompanied each step in the long battle for justice for bereaved relatives and the hundreds of injured and traumatised survivors. And indeed they were not alone, because strangers – politicians, celebrities and countless “ordinary” people – rallied round to support them in their grief.

In today’s Gospel reading tragedy has struck. Two of the wider group of Jesus’ disciples are walking towards Emmaus, fleeing Jerusalem and the apparent loss of someone they loved. They are “talking and discussing”, going over the dreadful events of the previous days. All their hopes had been fixed on Jesus, but his arrest was quickly followed by his brutal crucifixion. Now there are strange stories that the women disciples have found his tomb empty. Has someone even stolen his body? Could it get any worse?

Heartbroken, they struggle to make sense of it, partly because they are both suffering the same sense of bereavement. But, as they walk, they discover that they are not alone. A stranger begins to walk alongside them. With careful questions, he encourages them to share their heartbreak. And when they do eventually recognise him, he gives them hope in their hearts. In this way, the disciples learn that through the miracle of Easter they will never be alone again.

It’s easy to focus on that later part of today’s Gospel story, when Jesus is recognised in the breaking of the bread. That’s important, of course, with echoes of the Holy Communion service. But the earlier part is also important. Those two disciples might

have simply walked on. When Jesus asks what troubled them, they might have said, “Oh, nothing. It doesn’t matter.” Or even, “Mind your own business!”

If they had done that, they might never have heard him opening the scriptures to them, let alone have recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and discovered that he had risen from the dead for them, and for us. Simply by sharing their grief with this stranger, they opened a conversation that helped to heal them.

The account of the events that first Easter Day on the road to Emmaus illustrates many ways in which we can recognise Jesus today. We can recognise him in prayer, which isn’t simply talking to God, but listening. We can recognise him in Bible study, which isn’t simply opening the scriptures, but studying them. And, of course, we can recognise him in the breaking of the bread – but not only in the Holy Communion service. By sharing any meal with someone who needs companionship, we might perhaps learn to recognise the risen Jesus in that person.

If we truly want to be disciples of Jesus, to follow his example in our daily lives, today’s Gospel reading has an important message. We can walk with people who suffer, as Jesus did. We can try listening, being there for them, whether a friend or a stranger. Admittedly, we’re sometimes embarrassed, not knowing what to say when someone’s bereaved, worried or frightened. But Jesus began by simply listening. If we do likewise, we may find that we’re not simply helping others, but helping ourselves to understand what discipleship really means.

And if we ourselves are grieving, or anxious, or depressed, let’s not be afraid to share our troubles – with a friend, or even a sympathetic stranger. But especially with Jesus, as those two disciples did. He wants to help. To paraphrase that famous song, “Walk on, walk on, with Christ in your heart ... and you’ll never walk alone”.