

15 April 2018

Luke 24.36-48

Seeing things differently

The great artists and thinkers of this world help us to see things differently.

The great artists have always pushed at the boundaries of art, and enabled us to see beauty and form, shape and colour, indeed to see our world, in a different way – whether it be Michelangelo or Monet, Van Gogh or Picasso or Hockney.

Poets, playwrights and novellists have stretched our use of language and helped us to see our world differently, because they have given us richer language to use about our world – Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Elliot and Larkin.

Scientists with imagination and conviction also help us to see our world differently. Whether it was Copernicus helping us to see that the world revolves around the sun and not the other way round; or Isaac Newton giving us new language about gravity; or Darwin with his insights into the story of evolution; or Einstein forcing us to think again about the nature of time ... we find ourselves seeing the world differently, as they help us to see the world through a different lens.

And the story of the resurrection of Jesus is a story about seeing the world differently, in a very profound and transformative way.

And in fact it was very literally about seeing the world differently – it was, for these disciples, about seeing Jesus ... and then working out exactly what or who they were seeing. Because what was before their eyes did not fit in with any of the normal categories of the known and familiar world.

I love the way in which the resurrection appearances of Jesus are told. Because, on the one hand, the gospel writers are trying to convey the most amazing and incredible event that has happened in human history – the event that all of human history had been working towards, and the event that now gives meaning and hope for the future of human history ... and you would have thought that they would have told this story in way that proclaims – ‘This is so self-evidently true, that no one could have any doubts about it.’

But that's not how the stories come across ... the stories find people struggling to make sense of this once-in-a-universe event, because it breaks all of the moulds of our expectations of how the world works, of what it means to be human, and of what God is like ... and so these are very human stories of people on a journey of making sense of it all.

You see, had we started our reading a few verses earlier, we would have heard this group of people welcoming back into their company the two travellers who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus – and they welcomed them back with the excited news, 'It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.'

And it feels as if the good news of the resurrection had struck home, and they were all on board with what had happened.

But now Jesus actually stands among them ... and they are at a loss to make sense of what they are seeing.

You see, when it boils down to it, they probably only have two ways of thinking about how a dead person could possibly be seen standing in front of them.

One is that the dead body had been resuscitated, much the same way that the dead body of Lazarus had been resuscitated and brought back to life ... but this was patently not what they were seeing now, because people like Lazarus return in exactly the same living and breathing form, coming and going, the same as everyone, needing to open doors – they do not just appear as Jesus had now appeared among them.

But the only other way of thinking that is open to them is that of a ghost or a spirit. And so far from being excited, they are frightened because this begins to feel rather spooky like a haunting presence.

But Jesus needs them to look closely ... and to see differently.

Notice how many times we have reference to looking or seeing in these few verses:

- Look at my hands and my feet
- Touch me and see: a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have
- He showed them his hands and his feet
- They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence (this is all about them watching him eat)

And at the heart of all of this the declaration, 'It is I myself.'

In one sense he is the same Jesus that they have walked with and talked to; the same Jesus that they have eaten with and followed; he is the same Jesus that had been tortured and crucified, bearing the scars in hands and feet ... yet now he has been raised by God from the dead, living the promise of the end of history in the midst of history.

The raising of the dead in the midst of history was a whole new concept for them – indeed a whole new ball game ... even though Jesus had tried to prepare them for it.

And even so, the full force of it all only breaks through slowly. Their fright turns to joy ... but still a joy that is struggling to fully take it all in – v41 'while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement.'

But then Jesus goes on to show them that seeing him, the risen Lord differently – seeing him for who he is – means seeing the past and the future differently.

Because Jesus had been raised from the dead, the disciples had to learn a whole new way of seeing themselves, their past, and their future - indeed their identity, where they had come from, who they were, what they were all about.

This is what it would have meant to this group of disciples when we read that Jesus 'opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.'

The Scriptures for them were the books of the law, the prophets and the psalms – and it was from these writings and from this history that they built up their understanding of where they stood in the world – where they had come from, where they were going, how they should live and what they should live for ... because it was from these writings that they gained their sense of who God was, and what God was like and what God wanted of them.

This was much more than an intellectual exercise for them ... actually the word that is used here is that Jesus opened their 'hearts' ... because all of this had to do with who they were, and how they understood their identity and place in the world.

And Jesus showed them that because of the resurrection, they could now see all of this in a different light.

Jesus didn't just point them to one or two Old Testament texts that proved the resurrection. There was no way, from reading the Old Testament that you would have ever predicted that God would come to us in the form of a suffering Messiah who would be crucified and raised from the dead on the third day.

However, following the resurrection of the crucified one, you can look back and see how this is what God's story with his people Israel has been leading to all the way ... Jesus enabled them to read the whole of the story differently, and so to understand themselves differently, as God's people.

And now, in terms of who they were, what their purpose in the world is all about – well it's all about them being people who have seen things differently – they are called to be witnesses – people who have seen things that others have not seen.

And they are called to be part of this overriding purpose of God of spreading the news of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations.