

Luke 24:13-34 An Unforgettable Encounter

Introduction

Everyone of us has had some experiences that we will never forget. The mention of a name or place will bring the memories flooding back with clarity, even if they have been put at the back of our minds for many years. The person with whom we are speaking may have no knowledge of the significance of their words but our mind momentarily goes back to that significant event rather than concentrating on what they are saying, even though we may be giving the impression that we are still listening to what is being said to us. It was to be an unforgettable day for the duty Consultant Dr William Mackay at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. He was one of the most successful surgeons of his generation. The man rushed into the hospital had the lower half of his body horribly crushed. Only one consultant in the district would have considered operating on a man so injured with any hope of success. Mackay had confounded his colleagues on a number of occasions by the success of his surgical procedures. Although brought up in a devout Christian home in Montrose, Mackay had long since rejected its narrow constraints in favour of a more liberated private life that involved excessive consumption of alcohol. He had become a leading member of the Infidel Club in Edinburgh, a body for atheists that openly and coarsely ridiculed Christian convictions. His mother when he left home more than a decade earlier had given him a Bible inscribed with both his name and hers and urged him to read it. But some time later he pawned it for a bottle of whiskey and forgot all about it. In Edinburgh Royal Infirmary that day his mind quickly turned to the young man lying prostrate on the bed. 'What's the diagnosis Doctor', asked the patient? 'I guess you'll come through' was the response from Mackay. Instantly the young man replied: 'No doctor, I want a guess. I want to know if it is life or death.' Mackay was startled by the calmness of the young man and now gave him his full attention. In a quieter voice, the patient continued: 'Just lay me down easy. Anyway doctor, I am ready. I am not afraid to die.' This was something most unusual for this consultant. The young man continued, but now with increasingly laboured speech. 'I trust in the precious shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. If I have to die, I know I am going to be with him. But I would like to know the truth what is my condition.' The earnestness and sincerity of the young man brought powerful memories to Mackay of his own mother sharing her faith with him. The hardened cynic paused for a moment and admitted that the young man had at most three hours to live. Uncharacteristically moved by the young man's testimony he asked was there anything he could do for him as the time was short. 'Yes' he said, could you give my two-week way packet in one of my pockets to pay my landlady for the rent she was due and ask her to send me 'the book'. 'What book is that' Mackay asked? 'She will know' was his response. Some hours later after discharging his obligations through a junior member of staff he felt an unusual urge to return to the ward and enquire what had happened to the patient. 'He died a few minutes ago' reported a nurse. 'Did he get his book' asked Mackay? 'Yes' she replied 'its under his pillow'. Reaching under the pillow Mackay took the book and opened the cover, astonished to find the Bible he had pawned for whiskey many years previously. Reading his name and his mothers on the flyleaf caused him to shake. Putting the book under his doctor's coat he hurried to his room. Falling on his knees the tears began to flow as he confessed his sins to the God against whom he had burned his back as he had entered adult life. It was 1869 and twenty-nine year old William Mackay had an unforgettable encounter with his Lord and Saviour that day.

Acutely conscious of the evangelistic work he had done for the Infidel's Club he resolved to give the rest of his life as a preacher of the Christian Gospel. He became a minister of a small church in Hull but spent much time itinerating for evangelistic meetings all over the United Kingdom until his early death as the result of an accident, aged forty-three, in 1885 [Faith Cook, 'A divine Irony', *Evangelical Times* December 2010]. Has there been a time when you met with Jesus? Has there been a time when you gave your life to Him to trust and follow Him? The step William Mackay took is one each one of us needs to take. Only a few may be called to full-time service as ministers or evangelists, but all of us need to put our trust in Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

1. The Problem that Crushed Them (Luke 24:13-24)

It is Sunday the day of resurrection. The followers of Jesus had congregated in Jerusalem, stunned by the death of the One they loved. They had waited in the City of Jerusalem consumed by their grief –now it was the third day. They could not continue in mourning forever. They had to get on with their lives -irrelevant though it seemed at that time. Cleopas (also known as Alphaeus –according to Hegessipus a 2nd century AD historian living in the Holy land) was the brother of Joseph, the late step-father of Jesus. The grief was not solely that the One they believed was the promised Messiah had died, it was also a matter of a family bereavement as well. The apostolic circle was a close-knit community with many of those people also blood-relatives of each other, as well as being followers of Jesus. It was all too much to take in. The resurrection of Jesus was the last thing they expected, except at the last day when God would raise with new bodies the righteous who had died, in line with the standard Jewish view of the end-times. Despite the clear teaching of Jesus concerning His death and resurrection (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) neither fact had sunk in to the consciousness of His followers. Like many an intimation announced in churches up and down the land where words are clearly enunciated but the information provided does not register with a proportion of the people in earshot of the intended communication! To express amazement that they did not recognise Jesus is to miss the depth of their bereavement. In an unfamiliar place we do not recognise friends we did not expect to see and may not return greetings. In a context of a traumatic loss of the person around whom your life was centred and on whom your hopes for the future rested, concentration on anything will be at a minimum. I suspect that the last thing this couple really wanted was company on their lonely walk back to the village of Emmaus. In such a case eye contact would have been minimal if at all. Even if the stranger gave his name as Jesus this name was one of the most common first names of that era, not so in any future generations because the majority of Jews avoided it to prevent association with the followers of the Nazarene prophet. Christians likewise declined the use of this name out of reverence for their Lord. At a time when people were looking for the Messiah and hoping that it might possibly be their son –giving a boy the name Jesus (meaning Saviour) was a perfectly natural thing for them to do in that religious and cultural context. After all the man who led the zealot gang on trial before Pilate at the time of Jesus' arrest was called Jesus Barabbas (Matthew 27:16-17), but for reverential reasons to our Lord the first name of this terrorist / freedom – fighter was omitted from the text of Scripture. Origen the 4th Century Church Father was of the view that 'no-one who is a sinner [should be called] Jesus'. Jesus' first words to this couple and their response set the tone for the majority of this encounter. Luke 24:13-18 states: *Now that same day two of them were going to a village called*

*Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened.15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognising him.17 He asked them, What are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their faces downcast.18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days? Cleopas is only making polite conversation. He is struggling to grasp the possibility that the stranger alongside them has missed the tragedy that has unfolded in Jerusalem. Jesus does not give the game away by the open question *what things?* recorded in verse 19. This provides the opportunity for Cleopas to outline the nature and extent of his faith in the Lord Jesus in verses 19-24: *About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive.24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.* Cleopas is clear whom he viewed as the Messiah *Jesus of Nazareth*. He describes Jesus as *a prophet*. From early in His ministry Galileans had recognised Jesus as a prophet. In John 6:14, after the feeding of the ‘five thousand’ people said: *Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.* This is a reference back to Deuteronomy 18:15: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to Him.* Here was a committed follower who like the other disciples struggled to find the correct vocabulary to describe Jesus, but had offered total loyalty to Him during His three years of public ministry. Verse 21 makes it very plain that this hope has been crushed: *but we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.* It is likely that in common with the majority of the Orthodox Jews of that day this couple had seen Jesus as a Messiah who would overthrow the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom by force. This teaching of the Pharisees was held by almost all the devout people in the land, though not by the sceptical Sadducees who were the landed gentry and who stood to lose everything in the event of a successful revolt against Rome; only a tiny proportion of people like Simeon and Anna in Jerusalem had any kind of inkling that the work of the Messiah might not be in line with traditional expectations.*

Even the early reports from the women of the resurrection of Jesus, and the subsequent confirmation of an empty tomb had made no impact upon them as Luke 24:22-24 records: *In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find His body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said He was alive. 24Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but Him they did not see.* Any notion of the disciples of Jesus making up the resurrection of Jesus is utterly inconceivable –such a notion would never have entered their heads.

2. The Person that Changed Them (Luke 24:25-31)

25 He said to them: How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory? 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself. 28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if He were going further. 29 But they urged Him strongly, Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over. So He went in to stay with them. 30

When He was at the table with them, He took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognised Him and He disappeared from their sight.

The words of verse 25 to 26 uttered by Jesus must have taken them by surprise. The stranger who appeared ignorant of the events of the past week was now rebuking them for their lack of understanding of what had taken place. Cleopas and Mary had thought the stranger was foolish because he was apparently unaware of the sad events that had taken place in Jerusalem. It had been a week that had begun so well with the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus challenged them to look at all the Scriptures, that is all the Old Testament, and see how there was a clear reference to a suffering Messiah. Many rabbis both before and after the death of Jesus accepted that the Messiah would suffer; those Jewish scholars who wrote after the New Testament era naturally pointed to a future messiah still to come, they did not accept it was Jesus of Nazareth, otherwise they would have become Messianic Jews, that is Jewish believers in Jesus. We can only guess at which Scriptures Jesus chose to expound on the road to Emmaus. It is probable that some of these passages were amongst those used in sermons recorded in the book of Acts by Luke. Jewish Christians in the synagogues would also have been likely to follow our Lord's selection of Scripture verses, if that information was available. Jesus' use of the Old Testament was revolutionary to this couple. This was not because He was doing anything different in His use of the Bible from before His crucifixion, but because the concentration on this one subject was greater and more penetrating than before. It had taken the crushing of their misguided hopes as to the nature of Jesus' Messiahship and of the nature of the kingdom of God that He was proclaiming, before they could really grasp something of what Jesus was trying to teach them. However are not we equally guilty sometimes of seeking to get God to bless our plans, rather than requesting guidance for the discernment of His direction for our lives? Many Christians have testified over the years that it was in their desperation that the Lord met with them and lifted them out of their depression, despair or some form of difficulties. Praise God that no problem is too big for God to handle.

Jesus indicated when they arrived at their home that He would continue on His journey. They had to make a determined effort to persuade Him to stay the night at their house. He never imposes Himself on people in any generation, rather inviting us to follow Him as Lord and Saviour. To be a Christian we have to heed His voice and call upon our lives and enter into a relationship with the living God. As Christians we must seek to grow in our fellowship with God and in our love for Him. It is sobering to think how easily they could have missed out on knowing that they had met with Jesus! Exactly the same dilemma faces us, if we are not open to following Him as we should. However they invited Jesus in and as He said grace over a very simple meal their spiritual eyes were open to recognise the guest in their home. Normally the host in that cultural and religious context said the grace, but something must have happened for Cleopas to invite the guest to say the prayer. Bread was symbolically broken and a piece eaten after the grace signifying that the meal was now being eaten. We walk by faith, not by sight and this was a picture of what was taking place in this home that evening. Just at the moment their eyes were opened Jesus disappeared from their sight. Cleopas and Mary were convinced that they had more than enough evidence of the identity of their guest. It led them to finish their meal in a hurry and then start back on the journey to Jerusalem, this time as firm believers in the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. What an unforgettable encounter on the road to Emmaus.

Their lives would never be the same again. Have you met with Jesus yet? Have you put your faith and trust in Him? This is the most important choice you can ever make.

3. The Prospect that Confirmed Them (Luke 24:32-35)

32 They asked each other, Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? 33 They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together 34 and saying, It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon. 35 Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.

Aren't we all grateful for the benefits of hindsight! So many things are so obvious later in so many areas of our lives. Included in that understanding of the past is our relationship with Jesus; why did I not come to faith sooner? What was it that prevented me from acknowledging Jesus as I should have done? Or as a Christian are there any current blind-spots that are hindering me from living for Jesus as I should? This couple and other early Jewish followers of Jesus would often have asked: why did it take me so long to grasp what He was meaning in His sermons? Why was it that it was only after that first Easter that we grasped what He was saying about His death and resurrection. The past cannot be changed but the future can be. It is up to us to make the best use of our time to live for the Lord as we should. It was getting late even by the time they had arrived at the house. Verse 28 stated that it was *nearly evening*. It most certainly was evening when they did set off, a time when virtually no-one was on the roads with legitimate business. However, it is likely that they could get to Jerusalem before it was totally dark. What a transformation of the scene in the Upper Room to the one Cleopas and Mary had left behind earlier in the day. From doom and gloom to joy and great celebrations because Jesus had met with them that evening in Jerusalem. Jesus had also appeared that day to Simon Peter (I Corinthians 15:5) though the details are not recorded of that occasion. A later meeting with Peter is recorded in John chapter 21. Now Cleopas and Mary's story was simply another confirmation of what the others already knew. Within a short period of time Jesus was again to appear in their midst. Although, as Jesus was to tell Thomas a week later in John 20:29: *Because you have seen Me you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* The resurrection of Jesus transforms our lives because it is the final and demonstrable proof that God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in our place. It is also a solemn reminder that if the Bible has been proven true regarding the details of Jesus' first coming then we need to take with the utmost seriousness the reminder of His second coming as the judge of all the earth. God will fulfil all those prophecies too. For us as Christians He has left the Great Commission with us to urge us on to share the good news. Cleopas and Mary played their part –the question remains will you and I do the same in our generation? This was an unforgettable encounter. Will you commit your life to follow Jesus? I trust each one of us will do so, for Jesus' sake, Amen.