Theology on the Road

I love theology.

Theology means literally “God-study”. In practice, it is a rather complex field of philosophy, historical understandings, textual interpretations, and theories about some of the big themes of the faith: the meaning of salvation, forgiveness, resurrection, ministry, discipleship …

Well, the list goes on. I just picked up a copy of the “Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,” edited by Gerhard Kittel, a modest little number crammed elegantly into ten volumes. Ten volumes, because there are over 2,300 articles on New Testament words.

There is an abridged version (Yes, it’s called the “Little Kittel” by Biblical scholars), but it’s still 1,356 pages.

And that’s just the New Testament, not the Hebrew Scriptures (what we often call the “Old Testament). And it only covers those few books of the Bible, and doesn’t begin to talk about the whole history of theology; the early church fathers, the mystical theology of Byzantium, the controversies about how to define the nature of Jesus Christ (leading to the establishment of our creeds), the nature of icons, the medieval scholastics, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, modernism and fundamentalism and postmodernism … wow!

I, um, love theology.

Despite the complexity, and the sometimes un-Christian argumentativeness, I love the whine and whir of brains working with other brains to deepen our understanding of what the faith is about. “Faith seeking understanding”. That’s the foundation of all theological inquiry.

## Back to the story

At this point, I know I sound like one of my favourite cartoons. It’s one where the minister is leaning on the pulpit, and with real excitement in his voice is saying, “ … and then you lightly sandpaper the ends of the sparkplugs … but I digress.”

Talking about theology may sound like a digression, but it really isn’t. This passage from Luke’s gospel is packed with faith statements that make it more than just a story. There is material here about how to read scripture, the reality of the resurrection, the nature of Christian community, the meaning of Communion, and more besides.

And … it is a lovely story.

It begins with journeying, as so many stories do. Two of Jesus’ followers (part of the close circle, evidently, but not counted among the twelve apostles) are returning to Emmaus. Their home, perhaps? (they offer a place for Jesus to stay). Cleopas is named, but not the other disciple – it’s reasonable to guess that she might be his spouse; we know that many women were followers of Jesus. Perhaps a married couple?

And they are talking about what comes next. Does tomorrow mean fishing, or tax collecting? Back to the usual, or has everything changed so much that they can never go back again? And while they are talking and discussing, Jesus joins them.

Interesting, that they don’t recognize him. “Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” It’s possible, that with the exhaustion, the stress, and the worry, it’s tears in their eyes.

They can’t believe that this stranger hasn’t heard the news. And yet, they may just now be realizing that they are the bearers not of Good News, but of bad news to the circle of Jesus’ followers. They may realize that nobody in Emmaus has yet heard the news.

The news of Jesus’ death, and the news that the tomb was empty. You see, that’s really all they had to go on, and that’s not convincing enough. There are a dozen reasons why a tomb might be empty. There are reports of angels announcing that Jesus was still alive, but, really?

## Bible Study

Then the Bible Study begins. And it’s a deep Bible Study, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets.” This is what we call ‘salvation history’, the sweep of the story from Creation through disasters and joys and near-misses and accomplishments until the Incarnation. It’s the big picture.

And it’s not proof-texting. Jesus doesn’t say, “oh, you might have missed this particular verse, it proves it.” No, he recounts from the story told over and over by prophets and patriarchs and pilgrims and pastors. The story is this: that God will raise up a leader, but that leader will be a servant leader. Not a military victor, but a suffering servant. One who washes the feet of disciples, who welcomes children, who taught and healed but did so without power.

## Communion

Not all journeys have a goal, but all have stopping points. And on this journey, the disciples and the traveler on the road come to Emmaus. Hospitality demands that they invite him to stay. More than that, though. There is something about deep discussion, even when it is challenging, that makes us hungry for more. It triggers passion and engagement. Later, these disciples would say to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

So, they come to the house and invite him in. Still not recognizing him. Was he so different? Or is that some things need to be believed to be seen? No matter what they had heard, they hadn’t heard enough to really believe that Jesus was alive. They weren’t looking for him.

It wasn’t until they shared the meal that their tears dried, and they recognized him. But it wasn’t just because it was a meal. It was the particular set of actions that we continue to use each time we celebrate Communion: he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Take

Bless

Break

Give

## Our communion now

During this time of social distancing, we would like to be together in the same place, sharing in the breaking of bread together. We will, when the time is right. In the meantime, there is some grief and loss in not being able to celebrate as we are used to doing.

But this is one of the insights of this particular story. It is not about a gathering of people waiting to see if Jesus is going to arrive. It is about followers of Jesus going about their daily lives, facing the overwhelming challenges of what for them was a world gone mad. It is about Jesus himself coming near and meeting them (and us) where we are.

It is about the simplest of actions – breaking bread, sharing a meal – that point to the deepest realities. That God does not abandon God’s people. That Jesus Christ is risen, and present with us. That we are linked through the Spirit who blows through our lives, renewing and invigorating and strengthening us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.