

Recognizing Jesus (Luke 24:13-35)

(A sermon preached in St Andrew's church, St Andrews, 10 April 2005)

We've all had the experience of failing to recognize someone we know quite well. Personally I wish people would not wear those woolly hats pulled down over the forehead. Just not seeing the top part of a face can obstruct the process of recognition. But when you think about how extraordinary it really is that we're all able to recognize thousands and thousands of people, including those we know from the media, it isn't very surprising that sometimes we fail. Changes in appearance are the most obvious factor here. I remember when I first grew a beard - a very, very long time ago, and it was a fuller beard than I have now - I grew it while on holiday and when I returned to the Cambridge college where I was then living, I found I could walk around the place more or less anonymously. People didn't recognize me until I spoke or betrayed my identity in some other way.

There's also the phenomenon of seeing someone entirely outside the contexts in which you're used to seeing them. Their presence is so utterly unexpected by you that you simply don't notice them.

There's one important feature of these kinds of experiences of not recognizing someone that is quite important for understanding the Easter stories in the Gospels. Once you do recognize the person, then the recognition seems simply obvious. You don't continue to have doubts about who you're talking to. Once you get past the block on recognition, then the unfamiliar becomes familiar.

It's a curious feature of several of the stories of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection that disciples of Jesus failed to recognize him at first. Mary Magdalene, the first person to meet the risen Christ, thought he was the gardener - until he spoke her name, and presumably not just that but the familiar way he said it triggered recognition. But once she realised that it was Jesus, she's quite sure of it. She doesn't run back to the other disciples wondering whether it really was Jesus or not. She runs back to tell them, "I have seen the Lord." Similarly, when the disciples were out fishing on the lake in Galilee, and Jesus called out to them from the shore, they didn't know who it was at first - even though they knew by then that Jesus had in fact risen from the grave. But once one of the disciples recognized Jesus, the others had no difficulty doing so too. And of course something similar happened to the two disciples who walked the seven miles to Emmaus on the first Easter Sunday. Jesus was a stranger to them, just someone they met on a journey - until they sit down for a meal, and politely let the stranger play the role of host by breaking the bread at the beginning of the meal and giving thanks to God for it. It's the way Jesus performs this very common action that triggers recognition. They had no doubt eaten many meals with Jesus and knew exactly how he was accustomed to breaking the bread and giving thanks. Something specially characteristic of Jesus lifts the veil from their eyes, as it were.

I think this pattern of non-recognition followed by identification of Jesus, which we find in several of the stories of his appearances after the resurrection, is one of the rather odd features that make these stories credible as genuine testimony from those

who experienced them. Would they have made this feature up? Why should they? But on the other hand the stories do not let us suppose that seeing the risen Jesus was a case of mistaken identity. That can happen. A bereaved person can sometimes keep thinking they've seen the dead person - across a crowded street, just getting on a bus, driving past in a car. But whenever they get close enough they realise they're mistaken. The risen Jesus in these Gospel stories is not a figure fleetingly glimpsed. Nor is he a ghostlike phantom seen in the dusk. He's a thoroughly substantial figure seen up close. The disciples don't realise their mistake; on the contrary, they find it impossible to doubt who he is.

Why the difficulty they had recognizing him. I think in the case of the disciples on the road to Emmaus there must be an element of : Jesus is actually the last person they expect to meet, two days after, as all Jerusalem knew, he had died on a cross. These are despondent people, all their hopes shattered, finally giving up and going home, not people disposed to believe the quite astonishing good news that Jesus was alive, returning from death.

But I guess it was also the case that there was something different about Jesus. I doubt if we can pin down what it was. It seems to be part of the mystery of these quite strange stories, something the disciples realised but perhaps didn't know how to put into words. But whatever it was that was different about Jesus, the Gospels leave us in no doubt that he *was* recognizable as the same Jesus who had died. No room for mistaken identity.

The disciples were privileged to meet the risen Jesus, as they did, in his bodily reality. No later Christians have had that privilege. As Jesus said to Thomas "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." That's us.

Nevertheless the risen Lord is present to us in the Spirit here and now. We cannot recognize him in quite the way the disciples did. But he has promised to be present with us. How may *we* recognize him? After all, it could be sometimes he is present without our recognizing it, like the stranger who joined two disciples on the road to Emmaus. How do we recognize him? I mean, how do we recognize him *as Jesus*? How do we know he is the same Jesus we read about in the Gospels. I think there are at least three signs of Jesus' presence. They are ways in which Jesus promised to be present to us. Nothing very out of the ordinary, but assurances Jesus has given us, knowing we need them.

The first is the simplest. Jesus is present when and where his people meet together. When Jesus was on earth, during his ministry, he was usually to be found with a group of his disciples. Those disciples had come together, formed a group, only because Jesus was amongst them. Nothing but the presence of Jesus could have brought them together. And Jesus said, quite simply, that that was how it would be so long as the world lasts: 'Where two or three are gathered together *in my name*, there I am among them' (Matt 18:20) he said. When we are together because Jesus draws us together, then he is with us. It may be in church, it might be in house groups, or in any of the ways in which Christian people do things together in the name of Jesus. Jesus assures us of that.

Secondly, recall how the disciples, at home in Emmaus, recognized Jesus. As they reported it themselves to other disciples, 'he was known to us in the breaking of bread.' During Jesus' ministry, he was often to be found sharing meals with people, often his disciples but also frequently with those people on the margins of society that respectable people didn't associate with. Meals are not just food, they are cultural symbols. Jesus shared meals with people in order to share, in some measure, his life with them. And when Jesus, the night before his death, shared a last meal with them, he said to the disciples, in effect: this is how it will be so long as the world lasts. He would continue to break bread with them. And the actions were given a new meaning as the sign of his death, the body broken for us and the blood shed for us. When we break bread together in his name, it is Jesus, the crucified and risen Jesus, who shared his crucified and risen life with us. Over and above the promise to be with us whenever we meet in his name, Jesus has also given us this more specific assurance of his presence with us. For the Jesus we recognize in the eucharist, the communion, the Lord's supper, is Jesus crucified and risen.

Thirdly and finally, let's recall Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, in which, you'll remember, Jesus says to those on his right hand, those who will enter the kingdom: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' In other words, Jesus promises to be with us in the form of people in need.

Again this is characteristic of Jesus. During his ministry it was often among people like that that Jesus was to be found - the people in need, the people too often ignored and excluded. And so he told us that that is where he is to be found so long as the world lasts. Of course, in the parable none of the people actually recognized Jesus in the hungry and the strangers and the poor. Those who did not help these people and those who did are both surprised by Jesus' words. But Jesus told the parable so that we should be able to recognize him in the needy, so that we should have the strongest possible motivation for assisting them: the knowledge that it is with these people that Jesus has irrevocably identified himself.