

## RECOGNISING JESUS IN THE NEW NORMAL: 2. CLEOPAS & MARY

### Luke 24:13-35.

A few hours after Mary met Jesus in the garden, Cleopas goes to Emmaus, probably with his wife Mary. Let's call her Mary # 2 just for a moment. Mary # 2 was in fact with Mary # 1 in the garden on Easter morning and met at least one angel. They are both in the group watching as Jesus dies, and when his body is carried to the tomb. Front and centre of the events as they unfold. On top of all that trauma Mary and Cleopas have two boys—James and Joseph—who are Jesus's disciples. The whole family is tied up in the unprecedented changes.

Mary and Cleopas walk along, talking about the news; trying to make sense of it. Jesus catches up and joins in with the conversation. Now just like in the garden, He is unrecognised but this time he doesn't help. In fact, Jesus gives the impression that he knows nothing about what's been going on. They are amazed. 'Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days.' (24:18) (You must have had your social switched off.) So, they explain all about Jesus to this stranger who quite clearly has been completely out of it, how in just a week everything has gone crazy. Eventually they get it out of their systems and Jesus has his turn to analyse all that had happened. Just like Mary # 1, they don't recognise him. Unlike Mary, they fail to identify his voice or even work out who he is when they talk together for some hours. It's no wonder that Jesus sounds a little bit irritated with them. Anyway. Change of scene. Jesus is invited in for the night, and as guest he gets to say grace and pass the food around. When he does so, it's like flicking a switch for Mary and her husband. But Jesus disappears. 'That's why it was like our hearts burning when he talked to us'. A lightbulb moment. Get this. In unprecedented and worrying circumstances it was possible for Mary who had seen an angel, even if her husband hadn't, to talk with Jesus for ages, feel unusual warmth as she did so, but not make the link until they connect with him over a meal. They already knew Jesus but in our world that's less and less often the case.

Take the example of Susan. When I met her she had just prepared, cooked and cleared up lunch for 40 people at a drop-in. Almost the first thing she told me was that as a child, she had an invisible friend and as an adult the friend had become a comforting presence and source of wisdom. On and off she had gone to church to keep her mother-in-law company but that's as far as it went. When she had a daughter of her own, she joined a parent and toddler group connected with the drop in. And when her daughter was a lot older, she was eventually persuaded to take the catering job. It was over some months, probably a year or two, that by chatting to people and then exploring Christianity more carefully for herself she was able to name her invisible friend, the comforting presence that had stayed with her into adulthood. It gradually dawned on Susan that it was Jesus who had been supporting her for more than 40 years.

Final story. Paul the apostle is in Athens, the Oxford and Cambridge of its day. It's about 25 years after the first Easter and Paul tells the story to this new audience. Then he talks about how people can connect with God. It's not just by accepting the resurrection as fact. It is as much about feelings. He explains God isn't far away. Finding him is a matter of feeling—groping around. And get this. The period you live in makes a difference. (Acts 17:26-27)

The implication of what Paul had to say is that unprecedented times may affect people's sensitivity to God. It took a while for Susan, more like a gradual dawning than flicking a switch, and she needed help to put a name to that presence Mary and Cleopas needed something more to give the presence a name. In Athens they were definitely groping. They had an altar labelled to the unknown God. (17:23) They needed to do less thinking around and more feeling around.

Two things take away this week.

**Takeaway #1.** Even if you've been around Jesus for a while, in all the strangeness do find time to look for small feelings of presence. Make sure you pay attention to nudges that might be God wanting to connect with you. Be relentless in carving out enough space to notice little hints of the Spirit drawing close

**Takeaway #2.** On the basis of Paul's insight in Acts 17, and the buzz we're hearing in the current climate, more people than usual may be aware of comforting presence or sensing a whisper in the dark. If people like us—who know God is not far away—are finding connecting with Jesus and the Spirit more tricky than usual, other people may be in an even more complicated situation. Perhaps they need help in naming the Spirit who is reaching out to them. Maybe you could at least ask if that has been happening and raise the possibility of God with people you know well.