

## 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter: Luke 24:13-32 – ‘The Road to Emmaus’

I wonder if any of you have ever had the experience of meeting with, or talking with someone you didn't recognise, and then later discovering that they were famous or well-known? I must confess that I don't think I have, but as I was preparing for this week, I did come across a good modern day example, which gave me some insight into the emotions of Cleopas and his friend, as they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter Day.

In 2015 Cristiano Ronaldo, the world's most famous footballer, disguised himself and went out to play football in one of Madrid's central plazas for an hour. He just put on a wig, a beard, some old clothes and a some extra padding on his tummy to make him look a bit less (how shall we say) *sculpted*, and took a chair, a dog, a football (obviously) and a cardboard box for tips as he tried to coax passers-by to join in a game, or to reward him for doing some trick with the ball.

Almost no-one gave him the time of day. Most walked by quickly, embarrassed at the thought they might be asked for money by someone who looked more or less like a tramp. A few joined in for a bit, and then made their excuses. Eventually one little boy joined in properly, and passed the ball around with this stranger and tried to tackle him. After a while, the stranger picked up his ball, asked the boy's name, signed the ball... and then took off the disguise bit by bit.

As you can imagine, at that point pandemonium broke out. All those who had been rushing to avoid him now stopped and got out their phones. The cafes around the plaza emptied into the square, and the last scene on the video – which had been secretly filmed the whole time – was of Ronaldo walking out the square surrounded by a great entourage of dozens of fans. Unlike Jesus, not even Ronaldo could disappear from their sight!

The image that stayed with me, though, was the face of the little lad just after he realised what he'd done, that he'd actually not just met one of the world's most famous people, but played 1-on-1 and even tackled him. He was overcome with emotion and buried his face in his mum's coat.

That sense of overwhelming emotion was probably just a fraction of what would have been experienced by Cleopas and his friend. Can you imagine suddenly realising that you'd just spent the day with God himself, their Lord and friend Jesus. And they hadn't even realised!

The road to Emmaus is such a wonderful story, and there's so much we could say about it. *How Jesus opened their hearts to the Scriptures* and showed them how his coming was written throughout the ages of the Old Testament – something many of us have been exploring for ourselves with the bible course in 2020. *How Jesus met them in the breaking of bread* and everything that tells us about both hospitality and sharing communion. *How we can rejoice in further evidence of the resurrection* as Jesus widens the circle of people he appears to, people who will witness to the glorious truth of our faith in the years to come.

All of those are great to reflect on – but I just want to pick up on one simple point that the story tells me today. And it's this – **when we know and love Jesus, when we follow him, we are never alone.** Jesus walks with us every step of the way. We never walk alone.

Like the disciples, we might not always recognise him. There are times in our lives, tough times, when it seems like there is just one set of footprints in the sand, as the famous story goes. *But the point is not that God has left us, rather that we haven't recognised his presence at that point.* He is still there, still whispering truth into our ears, still breaking bread with us.

That is a message which encourages me in this challenging season. Many of you may have asked yourselves the question recently: where is Jesus? Or maybe others have voiced it to you. Perhaps it's something that has affected you in the past, or that you fear in the future.

The story of Emmaus tells me that Jesus is right there with us. He has never left us. He walks with us, he guides us, he shares with us. It's an extraordinary coincidence – or God-incidence – that on the day the church tells the story of the road to Emmaus, the song at the top of the charts has this as its chorus – and could there be a better word to share as we feast on this story today:

**Walk on, walk on, with hope in your hearts. And you'll never walk alone. You will never walk alone. Amen.**