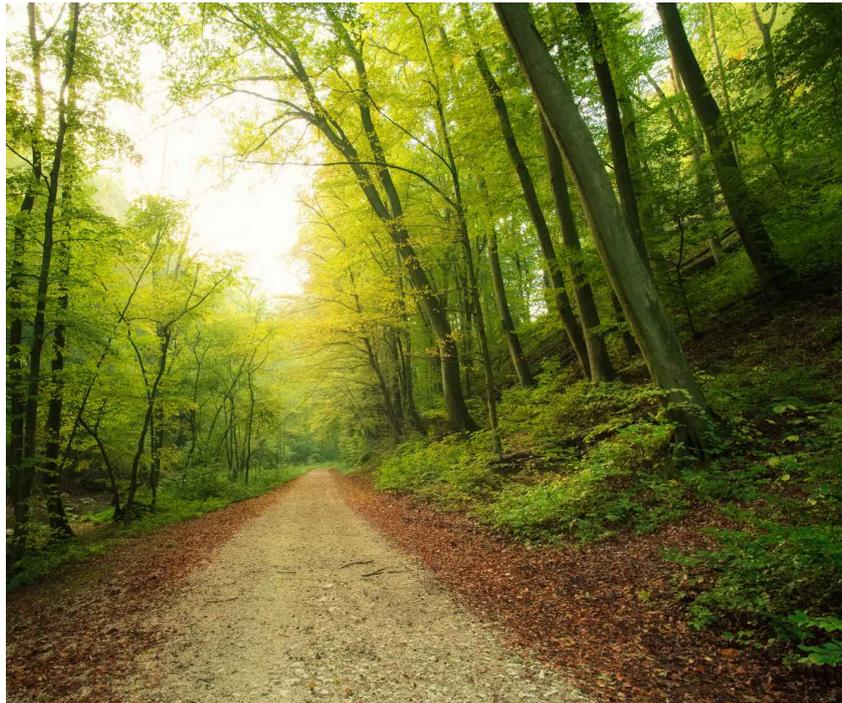


Reflection on Sunday 24 April 2022 at St Mary's and St Andrew's by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

(Gospel reading: Luke 24. 13-35)

The Road to Emmaus



I'm a big fan of the film director Steven Spielberg. I resent being a big fan because he's so mainstream. But for the last 48 years he's directed a succession of brilliant films. Last Christmas one of our daughters gave us a poster for the wall. It is called *A Bucket List of 100 Movies You Should Watch*, and six of them are Spielberg films. No other director comes close.

For me, the evangelist known as Luke is the Steven Spielberg of gospel writers. His gospel about the life of Christ and his follow-up blockbuster the Book of Acts, are beautifully constructed

stand-alone stories, vignettes if you like, which, linked together, describe skilfully the early days of Christianity.

He is also the patron saint of artists, physicians, surgeons, butchers, students and bachelors, which is the other reason I like him.

When I read this morning's gospel, I can easily see it as a film. You know: *The Road to Emmaus*, starring two unknown actors and a megastar playing the part of a stranger.

But it can also be seen - and this is the serious part - as a sequence of allegorical episodes that reflect occurrences in my own journey of faith and maybe yours as well.

I'm walking on a long and dusty road. It's getting dark. I'm feeling down in the dumps. Along comes a stranger. We start talking and, before I know it, life's looking up. Some fundamental truths are revealed that change my way of thinking. And, eventually, I feel able to share these experiences.

I've often spoken about meeting people in my life who I don't recognise immediately for who they are or what they offer. I don't mind admitting that, on occasions, I have had to overcome some prejudicial preconceptions about people; suspicious feelings that persist until they reveal something about themselves or say something that confounds or jolts me.

It's like the disciples in this morning's story. They meet a stranger and are so full of their own self-pity that they don't recognise who it is and are quite rude: *What do you mean, you don't know what's been going on around here. Where have you been, man?*

I can think of occasions when I have had thoughts like that about someone - maybe I haven't vocalised them, but in my mind I've known that I'm being disrespectful.

Forgive me if you've heard this story before but, long ago, I was the Editor of a national trade magazine called *Caterer & Hotelkeeper*. It was well-known and in those pre-internet days it was the focal point for Britain's hospitality industry. It had a weekly readership of a quarter of a million people, mostly managers and staff in hotels, restaurants and bars. As the Editor, I had quite a high profile in the industry, not because of what I had done but because my picture used to appear in the magazine every week. I used to get letters and phone calls from complete strangers who came to me as if they knew me and were very familiar.

One day, at the end of a particularly difficult week, when I was beginning to feel that I'd had enough and couldn't cope with the job, I opened a letter from a former chef. His name was Michael Quinn. I didn't know him but he had an MBE after his name and seemed to have been quite well known in the 1970s and 80s. He was now down on his luck and wanted some advice. My first reaction was to think '*Oh no, not another one*', and put his letter in the square metal filing bin under my desk. But, suddenly, something made me rethink.

I wrote back to him and agreed to meet him. It turns out that he did used to be famous; he'd been one of the first TV chefs, he'd cooked for the queen and he'd been the first British Head Chef of the Ritz in London. But the pressure had got to him, he'd started drinking, he became unreliable, he'd lost a sequence of jobs and ended up homeless and sleeping on a bench in the back streets of Leeds.

He'd got in touch with me because he was now dry and wanted to set up a charity to help prevent young people in the industry making the same mistakes as he had. My magazine was the perfect platform to tell his story. We did; the charity was launched and went on to provide advice and education for hundreds of catering students, many of whom were already on a trail of addiction. It probably saved their lives.

God does that to you. He brings people into your life that you initially can't be bothered with but who go on to be real game changers on your particular journey.

I don't blame the disciples on the road to Emmaus for not recognising the risen Christ. In physical terms, Jesus was probably looking a bit beaten up and not like the Jesus that the disciples had spent time with in the previous weeks and months.

But Christ persisted in revealing himself in stages and the story ends on a real high, when these two unknown disciples share their story of joy with the other disciples.

Life is full of phases, ups and downs and all sorts of pilgrimages. Sometimes we plan for them, sometimes they take us completely by surprise. Luke's Emmaus story is an episode of two disciples on a walk that comes from grief and trauma, from profound disappointment and sorrow. It is a story that starts with the slow steps of the depressed and cast down. But it ends with the excited running of the redeemed, and the joy of finding life transformed.

This story can speak to us when we feel that we are not on a positive journey forward; when we feel that we are simply retreating or walking slowly into a future that we dread or fear.

This story speaks to those who might think they have no energy for anything as positive as a pilgrimage at all, but whom God comes to meet as they struggle to put one foot in front of another. It is a story that is very honest about hopelessness and loss, but also about how God comes to find us in those places. It's an Oscar-winning story for Christians (and non-Christians on the road to faith).

Steven Spielberg would be proud of it because it shows us how God walks beside us and can transform even the deepest bereavement and loss into a journey of hope. This is a story has many meanings but, most of all, it is a story that invites those who are deep in sorrow to walk in hope again.

Amen