

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## A Third One Walking Beside Us

Today's story of Emmaus is one which, to my way of thinking, defines the words it uses. Whenever I think of *disciples*, or *opening the Scriptures*, or *inn*, or *evening*, or (perhaps most powerfully) *recognise*, my mind tends to call up the atmosphere of this glorious narrative. Every sad journey I've ever taken seems evoked in the walk down from, away from Jerusalem to this unheard-of hamlet, and here are the bereaved, disappointed, burdened figures of all the downcast people who have seemed to me too far from joy to be reached. They *argue* about their state of mind, struggling to find some order, at least, if not consolation. They are confronted, as we all are, with a choice between keeping alive what they fear is lost forever, and becoming hardened in their disillusion: between hope and despair.

### A Mysterious Presence

In the Greek original the stranger asks what they are *arguing* over. It's important; their pain has not united these two, but set them at odds with each other. This is a great warning to us. There is nothing automatic about our sharing in the redemptive work of Jesus. We don't inherit the Gospel just by suffering, which can leave us divided and embittered; and we don't sense our part in the sacrifice of the Cross just because we're Christians. There is further work for us to do: each of us must process our experience, find our place on the map of the whole mystery of salvation. Only with these co-ordinates will we suffer redemptively, or meet the risen Lord in the confusion of our real life. This is what the mysterious "third One walking beside you" does for the two who walk to Emmaus. That's why they don't recognise him as he meets them: the last thing we expect is to meet Christ in the convulsion, the "Ground Zero" of our disaster. It's a measure of their previous devotion to him, that they cannot conceive of his being with them as they slink away from Jerusalem, a couple of lost causes without even a single mind to unite them. But that is what happens. He walks beside them, and asks to know the whole picture as they see it: he wants to hear, if you like, their reading of the map. In our prayers we should get used to doing what Cleopas and his friend are doing today: explaining to our Lord why it is that we are so miserable, so divided from each other by what we suffer, why we keep our distance from our fellow-travellers on the human road. He will certainly

find something to say to us if we pray in this honest fashion, and ask his blessing on the graceless parody of faith we've come to accept.

### Tell It All

The wonder of the story is in their telling. What we hear from them is actually the shape of the Christian creed, as we recite it every Sunday. They already possess, *without knowing it*, the materials from which the faith is made that saves the world. All they need is to put their trust in it. What does this mean for us? We know the creed backwards: our students once complained that it spoils the liturgy, because it is the same every week, and afterwards everybody is asleep. We're a mirror-image of Cleopas and his friend: they knew the Cross without faith; we know the faith, as it were, without the Cross, and are bored by it because it is the same. But of course, it *isn't* the same. The Cross is, like the third person on the road, the unexpected. Our weekly discipline is to recognise it as it has come to us. The recital of the creed ought to be a checking of the map, to find the place where we are standing, here and now, in this new and vital present moment. In our response to the question – *What are you fighting over, as you walk along?* – we find our place, not on the map of Jerusalem, but on the map of the Gospel, the plan of God, the *mysterion* of redemption.

### God's Hidden Plan

This word, *mysterion*, is the Greek for the hidden intention of God for his creation. It is hidden from us, as the identity of the third traveller was hidden from them. Even if, by definition, the purposes of God are beyond our knowing at this time, we know that they are our ultimate truth. What is asked of us is that we should let him open to us the Scriptures, and, step by step *even on the road that leads away from Jerusalem*, come to sense that inner fire which prepares us to *know* him in the breaking of (daily) bread. That is what turns daily bread into the Sacrament of Eternity: not boring, but awakening us to ardent life.  
*Fr Philip*