

## **Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Sunday 26 April 2020 11.00am (online service)

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### **“Their eyes were opened, and they recognised him”**

Just imagine the scene: there you are, taking your daily allowed exercise with those with whom you live. The sun's shining, the last of the Camellias and cherry blossom are stunning, you're chatting about the latest social distancing requirements and hopeful developments in hospitalisation statistics. Then along comes this seeming stranger, walks alongside you and starts talking. He asks you what you've been talking about. “Are you the only person in London who hasn't heard of social distancing”, you cry. And then when you get to the park, for some reason, you decide to invite him to join you for a snack, but it's only when he breaks bread, that you recognise him. Perhaps Jesus was wearing full PPE.

Sometimes the juxtaposition of the gospel and our current times is almost surreal. The idea that we would willingly walk next to a stranger, chat to them, and then invite them to join us for dinner...it's almost extraordinary.

But the thing that would be really extraordinary would be only then to recognise that the stranger was not a stranger after all, but a friend you had given up for dead three days earlier. Someone you had been willing to follow, someone for whom you'd been willing to give up your ordinary life – and yet you still didn't recognise him.

Those of you who know Gareth, will know that sometimes he likes to quote from Sherlock Holmes, particularly from a story called ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’; it starts with Dr Watson talking:

“I believe that my eyes are as good as yours.”

“Quite so,” Holmes answered, lighting a cigarette, and throwing himself down into an armchair. “You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room.”

“Frequently.”

“How often?”

“Well, some hundreds of times.”

“Then how many are there?”

“How many? I don't know.”

“Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.”

It is very easy for us to know the theoretical truth that God is always with us – we'll celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in a few weeks' time – but to find it much more difficult to know the emotional life-changing truth that God is always with us – the truth that would allow us more fully to trust in Her or Him. And one of the reasons for these struggles is that we, and I definitely include myself in that, can struggle to observe Jesus and struggle to observe God. We live in bleak times and there are many who struggle to know the presence of God at the moment – how can they when hundreds are dying every day from an invisible disease, thousands are fighting for their lives on hospital ventilators scarcely able to breathe, and millions have lost their jobs and are wondering how they will pay their bills.

The Psalms are a series of prayers written thousands of years ago. They were prayers which were kept by the people of God as having value, and they often express anger, frustration and grief. Many would have been written by people who would understand our feelings and emotions today. Our Psalm today, though is written from the perspective of a few months' time, written from the perspective of relief and thanksgiving after a time of trial:

“The snares of death encompassed me;  
the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me;  
I suffered distress and anguish.  
Then I called on the name of the Lord:”

As I said earlier, times are tough for many of us, but one thing that we can draw from the Psalmist is that the sun will rise again tomorrow. We are a resurrection people, and there will be a time after COVID-19, when we will be able to express our relief and thanksgiving.

But in the meantime, as we are still walking through the valley of the shadow of death (to use imagery from a very different Psalm), where is God? God is all around us, and is walking alongside us, each and every day. God is at the bedside of the dying, and with those healthcare professionals treating them. God is in the homes of those who have lost their jobs and their livelihoods.

So why can't we always observe Him or Her? Well, maybe we should look again at the Gospel reading set for today. The two disciples had been looking for a leader who would be the one to redeem or save Israel. Yet what they got instead was a leader who preached about the need to give up our lives, a leader who was willing to give up his own life, and a leader who had risen from the dead. Despite years of walking with Jesus, they were still looking for the wrong thing.

When we are struggling to observe God, is it sometimes because we are looking in the wrong place as well? Are we still looking for a God who can deliver 10,000 ventilators by the end of the month, three plane loads of PPE by the end of the week, or to save the lives of our nearest and dearest? But when we talk to our brothers and sisters in Christ about where they see or observe Jesus, we get very different answers – it might be in the face of the homeless, in the beauty of creation, healthcare workers sometimes talk about seeing Jesus in the face of the dying.

These have been weeks of huge uncertainty and tumult, and they have been weeks when some of us have struggled to observe God, yet these have also been weeks when most of us have had our eyes opened.

There are some people who have found it easier to see God at times like this. The sudden stillness after months of endless activity has given an opportunity to reflect and to look for God and to become more aware of God's presence. For most of us, we have suddenly started observing people that we had seen most weeks of our lives and expressing gratitude for them: supermarket workers, rubbish collectors and bus drivers. We had seen them every week, but not given them a second thought – and the last few weeks have opened our eyes and allowed us to recognise them.

That sudden recognition can be a similar experience to the sudden recognition we get when we realise that we've been looking at God all along, yet never realised it before. In the language of Sherlock Holmes, that we had been seeing God without observing Her or Him.

As we go forward through the season of Easter and resurrection, then, be assured the risen Jesus will still be with us as we take our afternoon walks, just as much as he was on the road to Emmaus two thousand years ago. But also be assured that the risen Jesus might not look how we expect, and that sometimes it might take us hours or days or weeks to realise that we've been staring him in the face all along.