

THE ROAD TO EMMAUS 2020 - Revd Canon Anne Taylor

How about a love story to cheer us up in these difficult times?

The story of 2 famous poets, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. Robert Browning wrote those immortal lines, "Oh to be in England now that April's here!" - though he wasn't thinking of April 2020!

Browning was born in 1812 on a sugar plantation in the Caribbean and was an ardent atheist. Elizabeth's father was also a sugar plantation owner though she was born in England.

Elizabeth began writing poetry when she was 12 years old and later when Robert Browning came across her poems he began writing to her. Over the space of 18 months they exchanged nearly 600 letters! Romance was blossoming between them. Though there was one big snag Elizabeth's father was both oppressive and obsessive and bitterly opposed to any thought of his daughter marrying Robert Browning.

Their solution – they eloped, married secretly in London and fled to Italy!

Not only was Browning's life transformed by their marriage, but so too were his beliefs. Elizabeth was a devout Christian and meeting her transformed his atheism into belief, so much so that he could write, "I believe in God, in truth and in love, as one just escaped from death."

Meeting Elizabeth changed him.

We could say the same about the two disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Meeting Jesus changed them. As they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us as he was talking on the road?"

Their gloom was changed to joy. Their despair was changed to hope. Jesus changed the direction of their lives.

Emmaus is situated to the west of Jerusalem. Maybe it was the glare of the setting sun in their eyes that prevented them from recognising Jesus.

As they set out to go back to Jerusalem to join the disciples they were heading east. It has been said that as Christians we are people walking not towards the sunset but always towards the sunrise – the direction of new life, new love, new purpose, and that is why churches are built facing eastwards.

The two followers on that road to Emmaus were probably going home - perhaps they had to go back to work or had commitments to attend to, families to look after.

They had just endured a tumultuous 3 days in Jerusalem – the arrest, the trial, the crucifixion of Jesus – the dashing of all their hopes. And then what they describe as the astounding news of that first Easter morning – that Jesus had been raised –

verified by the fact that “some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said.”

Their spirits went from the depths to the heights.

And that evening, even though they were going back to their ordinary, everyday lives, yet those lives would never be the same again. They would always be living in the light and from the perspective of the resurrection. And as we move into the post-Easter period, that’s what we have to do too.

We have to bring the hope of the resurrection into our everyday lives, back into our homes, to our families and friends, in everything that we do, even in these restricted times of lockdown and social distancing.

Jesus became known to Cleopas and his friend when he broke bread with them – a familiar gesture – and then the penny dropped. They recognised Jesus in the familiar. And it should be the same for us.

If we don’t expect to find God in the familiar events of our everyday lives, we will never recognise him.

If we only expect God to appear in dramatic events and miracles we will never recognise him in ordinary events and ordinary people.

When Robert Browning met Elizabeth Barrett everything changed – his life, his beliefs, his outlook on life, everything was infused with a new light.

So too for Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus.

And so for us too. As we meet Jesus in the breaking of bread may our hearts burn within us as we worship - together yet in our separate homes - let his loving presence transform our everyday lives, and imbue them with a new purpose and hope, even in these challenging times.

Seeing and Living life in the light of the resurrection.

Let me end with these lines written by Elizabeth Barrett, which capture the idea of seeing things differently and from a new perspective,

“Earth is crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God, But only they who see take off their shoes; The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

Living in the light and faith of the Resurrection - may we never just see blackberries but God in every common bush and in every simple action at this time.