

Companions on the Way

There is a joy to following Jesus in the company of others.

Travelling together enables us to learn from and support one another. The Bible contains accounts of many journeys undertaken in company. Perhaps the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35) is the most familiar. Whatever our circumstances, this journey – in which Cleopas and friend were filled with joy – points to four discipleship actions.

Discovering the presence of Jesus in the voice and face of a seeming stranger involves the two disciples in taking actions which are best summed up in the message drummed into children by their parents: ‘Stop; look; listen. Then it is safe to walk.’

What follows is a guide to help you walk the Way by practicing discipleship either on your own or, even better, with a friend or a group. There are four sections: Stop, look, listen, and walk. Each section can be used as a session to explore together. Each section contains the text followed by a reflection. To help earth each action, a story of contemporary discipleship has been included, followed by something to ponder, a prayer and a suggestion for simple action. If you decide to meet with a friend or as a group, you can share together next time how you got on with the suggested response. How you use this resource is, of course, up to you, and we hope you will find it flexible enough to use in a way that works best for you. Do let us know how you got on and if you have any stories to share of personal discipleship we would love to hear them. Email Simon Peters at wtw@urc.org.uk or call 020 7520 2718.



The Walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)

¹³ Now on that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognising him. ¹⁷ **And he said to them: ‘What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?’ They stood still, looking sad.**^[b] ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him: ‘Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?’ ¹⁹ He asked them: ‘What

things?’ They replied: ‘The things about Jesus of Nazareth,^[c] who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.^[c] Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.²² Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,²³ and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.²⁴ Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.’²⁵ Then he said to them: ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah^[e] should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’²⁷ **Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.**

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying: ‘Stay with us, because it is almost evening, and the day is now nearly over.’ So he went in to stay with them.³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.³¹ **Then their eyes were opened,** and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight.³² They said to each other: ‘Were not our hearts burning within us^[f] while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’³³ **That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem;** and they found the 11 and their companions gathered together.³⁴ They were saying: ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.



Stop

*And he said to them: 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?'
They stood still, looking sad.*

The Bible has many examples of journeys being interrupted. Perhaps the most well-known account is that of Saul's trip to Damascus being brought to a standstill by a vision of Jesus (Acts 9:3-6). Saul's mission to arrest followers of the Way is transformed as he sees with new eyes and tells people in the synagogue about the way of Jesus.

Here, on the road to Emmaus, the followers of Jesus are stopped by a question from a stranger. The comment breaks into their grief and disillusionment. It literally stops them in their tracks. 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?' asks Cleopas, no doubt with more than a hint of frustration that the world seems to be carrying on as normal despite the pain and disappointment he's currently experiencing. Yet, this annoying, off-putting question from a stranger gives the followers of Jesus a chance to reflect on what's upsetting them. Not only have they lost their dear friend and mentor, he has been killed by those in power whom he was supposed to overcome. The long-awaited promise of redemption seems far away. It's also probable that they felt some guilt that they couldn't stop it from happening.

At this point, in the stopping, reflecting, grieving and wondering, the stranger begins to turn things around. All kinds of circumstances are used by God to bring us to a standstill and, in so doing, start something new.

Sometimes a profound life change, such as loss, or moving house, or the birth of a child, can provoke a reappraisal. A moment when we pause in the rush of our days. When we are working through our to do list, we need to be open to the first of our discipleship actions: the willingness to stop.

A disciple stops

For Ron Hilditch, a former West Kirby United Reformed Church member, the time for stopping and reflecting came with retirement. He 'asked the Lord for something useful to do' with the skills he had been given. Before long, Ron received an answer.

'One Sunday, Kat Taylor, the Foodbank Project Coordinator for Kings Lynn, Norfolk, came to my church and spoke about how the Lord had blessed the work there,' said Ron. 'I felt the Lord say to me: "Go and offer to make furniture, specifically beds, for the work in King's Lynn."'



Ron followed this direction and was informed by Kat that there were many homeless people who the charity could help provide accommodation for, but not furniture.

Inspired by James Hudson Taylor, a 19th century British protestant Christian missionary to China, who said: 'God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply,' Ron set about sourcing material for his work.

Elders at Upton URC, which had closed, donated 12 pews and wood from an organ. This enabled Ron to make five single beds.

Kat said: 'Ron's kindness is such a blessing and an answer to prayer for us here in King's Lynn.'

In Birkenhead, Ron went onto make 25 beds for The Wirral Ark Project and was then asked by the Charles Thompson Mission to make storage racks with old pews from the Claughton URC, which had also closed.

For this transformation, that came through a time of stopping and reflecting, Ron gives God glory: 'I have been greatly blessed by this project, and the Lord has given me guidance throughout, down to every last detail. From concept through to manufacture, to polishing and final pick-up and delivery – the Lord's guidance was there.'

Something to ponder

Have you been 'too busy' or 'too distracted' to think about where you find God, or where God finds you? Could you stop, even for a short time, to put the baggage of everyday busyness down and give yourself time to meet with God?

Prayer

Ever-present God,
You meet us in the middle of our life's journey.
Help us to recognise the moment that you want us to stop.
Give us grace to resist our craving for control,
courage to recognise your voice in that of the stranger
and the willingness to be still.
Amen

Suggested response

Interrupt your morning routine, put your to-do list to one side, and for five minutes practice coming to a standstill. What might God reveal to you in the stillness and silence?

Look

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight.

The companions on the road to Emmaus have walked with Jesus for a good while. They have talked together, and he has explained the scriptures to them. And now, as night falls, they urge him to stay with them. It is while they are at the table that they finally see. When Jesus takes the bread, blesses and breaks it, they realise who is with them. Suddenly their eyes are opened and they recognise him.

There are many moments in the Bible where people in an encounter with God all of a sudden see. Even in Genesis (28:16), Jacob said: 'Surely, the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.'

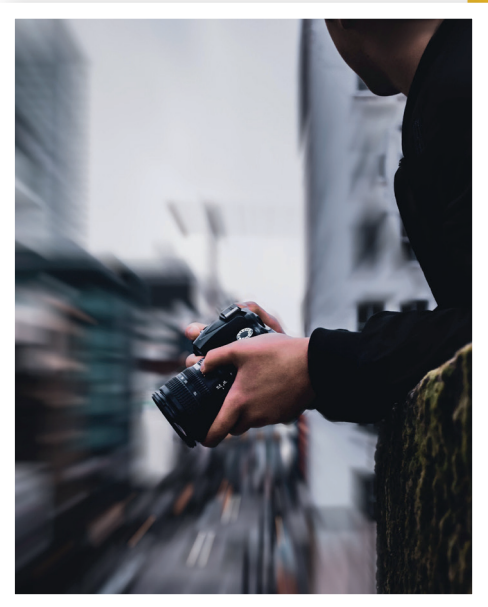
At a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-15), after a miraculous catch (John 21:1-8) and even in the midst of persecution on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-18), eyes are opened and people see anew. As a result, they look at themselves and the world around them with new eyes. This is the seeing of faith that has God as its focus. It is a seeing that is aware that God is present, walking alongside, revealing Godself in the breaking of bread. It is an awareness that all of creation is vibrating with the presence of God.

It is a seeing that makes us walk in the world differently – it changes us, it softens our hearts and makes us more compassionate. It makes us look at the world with the eyes of Jesus, who, seeing the crowds, was filled with compassion and moved to healing, forgiving, feeding and restoring. It makes us look at the world with eyes of grace. And when we look at the world with the eyes of grace, we will see its signs everywhere.

A disciple looks

Despite years of experiencing oppression for being a Christian in Pakistan, Aftab Alexander Mughal, a United Reformed Church elder, continues to use his gifts and talents to struggle for a more just society, both in the UK and in his country of origin. Aftab says:

'Christianity is the biggest religion in the world. Millions of Christians are able to live a peaceful life, but in some countries around the globe, faithful Christians face discrimination and oppression. Pakistan is one of those where native Christians face persecution because of their faith and live in absolute poverty because they don't have the equal opportunities needed for a dignified life. As a Pakistani Christian, that unpleasant experience has had a significant influence on me.'



'When, in 1984, I saw that a Christian neighbourhood and its church was attacked, I decided to raise my voice against human rights violations and injustices against all downtrodden sections of society, including religious minorities. Firstly, I formed a Christian youth group, and then I started publishing a magazine. I also used to write articles for the national media.

'Human rights activism is not easy in Pakistan, so I faced a lot of pressures from state agencies and non-state actors. I have been attacked a couple of times, but carried on my struggle because of my faith. The following verse is always a great encouragement to me: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free," (Luke 4:18).

'Because of the ongoing troubles, at one point, friends advised me to leave the country for the safety of my family. We therefore fled Pakistan and arrived in the UK in 2005 to start a new life. Although I have been living in the UK for 14 years, I still raise my voice for a just society in Pakistan by publishing a monthly e-magazine, *Minority Concern of Pakistan*.

'Now that I am living in the UK, I have become a member of the United Reformed Church and am continuing to serve people who need help the most. For the last few years, I have been helping the refugee community to integrate into local society. My focus is to empower them, so they can have the independent and dignified life which so many are unable to enjoy.'

Something to ponder

Like the stranger on the road to Emmaus, God is walking with you. How has the grace and goodness of God been revealed to you in your own life? Where do you see the signs of God's grace and goodness in your community?

Prayer

Companion Christ,
As we walk through this world,
our minds cluttered and our hearts closed,
open our eyes to the wonder of your presence,
that we may see the world as you see it
and become what you want us to be –
people of compassion and grace, light and love.
Amen

Suggested response

Think about a piece of art that you have encountered, a clip you've watched online or a film/TV programme you have seen. Ask yourself what God may be showing you through it. Share your answer with someone else.



Listen

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

The followers of Jesus would have been used to hearing texts. In congregations, in small groups, in conversation, the Bible would be explored with rigour and regularity. However, in this time of grief and uncertainty, the followers of Jesus are offered the chance to truly listen for God's voice in their understanding of how these well-known passages relate to each other. For not only does the stranger interpret the texts, as the disciples would be used to doing together, the stranger weaves them into a pattern which reveals to them afresh everything they have been hoping for.

Many expected that the Messiah would be a warrior who would free God's people from tyranny. They expected a royal prince with status and power to match. Instead, they got a carpenter who spent his time among the poor and marginalised, preaching love and forgiveness before being killed by the very people he was supposed to defeat. No wonder the disciples were grieving!

Yet, as the stranger continues to talk with them, it becomes clear that all they have hoped for and been promised is contained already in the Word of God in Scripture; the presence of God among them, good news for the poor, salvation and liberation, rising from the dead, God returning to reign on earth. The challenge is hearing this message above the noise of everything else that's going on around them.

Listening for God's voice has never proved easy. The boy Samuel, lying awake, hearing himself being called by name, had to be taught how to respond (1 Samuel 3: 1-21). Even those experienced in the ways of God have to learn how to interpret what they hear. Elijah, the terrified prophet on the run from Jezebel's fury, sheltered in a cave on hearing earthquake, wind and fire before finding that God spoke in stillness (1 Kings 19:1-21).

A disciple listens

Sharon Matthews from the 'Fusion' project in Tonge Moor tells us how much the phrase 'follow me' has meant to her in her discipleship journey.

'When I heard that, in Mark's gospel, the first words that we hear Jesus speaking are: "Follow me," that got me thinking about the times when we need to go somewhere and we say: "I don't know exactly where I'm going or how to go there, so I could do with some direction from someone to help me." It made me start to think about my journey so far and what my interpretation of Jesus'



words: 'Follow me,' have meant. I thought about all the people God has put in my path who I followed when I didn't know which way to go, and even moments when I have been able to say to others: "Follow me."

'I started to do some voluntary work and met someone I hadn't seen for years who was looking for help. Some days later, we got talking about life and she spoke about what a difficult time she had been through, growing up suffering abuse and being moved between different foster placements. When I said to her: "You've been through so much, what gives you strength?" she said: "God."

'Tracy was attending church and asked me if I would like to go along with her, so I went, but found it wasn't really for me. Other friends came along and encouraged me to try different things, so I went to a range of churches with different worship styles, activities and feels, which my friends introduced to me, eventually settling on one in which I felt at home and able to grow as a disciple.

'In time, I started to get more involved in church life. I told a friend about it, and she did too!

'A church leader showed great faith in me and asked if I'd be interested in developing what has now become a thriving community hub called Fusion; it has allowed me to share God's love and presence with lots of others, some of whom now attend church and are part of a loving church family.

'God put people in my path when I was on my journey and didn't know where I was going. Those people said: "Come on, follow me," and, in turn, God has used me to say to others: "Follow me."

Something to ponder

'The most serious obstacle to a life of faith is inattention. Esther De Waal, in her book *Seeking God: The way of Saint Benedict*, says: 'We are not being truly attentive unless we are prepared to act on what we hear. If we hear and do nothing more about it, then the sounds have simply fallen on our ears and it is not apparent that we have actually heard them at all.'

Jesus addressed the companions' current preoccupations in the light of biblical promises. Their sorrow had to be put into the context of God's purposes. Can we therefore attend not only to our feelings but to how our personal circumstances or our societal need is being woven into God's redemptive intentions?

Prayer

Speak, Lord, for your children are listening,
not for what we want to hear, or think we should,
but for the eternal wisdom of your Word.
We know it won't be easy. We know it won't be comfortable,
but we also know that we need to hear it and respond to it.
We ask for the willingness and strength to do so.
Amen.

Suggested response

Consider your favourite piece of music. Why is it so important to you? Does it communicate an important message? Listen to it afresh. What might God be saying through it? Share it with friends and listen to each other's perspectives.

Walk/go

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the 11 and their companions gathered together. They were saying: "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The companions' encounter with Jesus on the road resulted in their sudden stopping, listening anew to familiar scriptures and their eyes being opened in table fellowship through the breaking of bread. But it doesn't stop there. Stopping, looking and listening led to a change of plans and a move to action. Instead of staying, they get up and returned to Jerusalem to tell their friends what had happened. Jesus is alive and has been made known to them in the breaking of bread.

Being a disciple involves allowing one's journey to be interrupted, ready to respond carefully to the words God may be speaking, looking at one's life and community in new ways. Being a disciple is about discerning where the Holy Spirit may be leading and focusing our energy on, seeing the signs of God at work. This requires paying attention to your community with curiosity and openness to what the Spirit is revealing. It asks of us that we are willing to be present and to listen to the stories of those we share life with. Discipleship is not about fixing all the problems of the Church; it is walking alongside the Spirit on the move!

We may find that the Holy Spirit initiates all sorts of opportunities in our lives – not just through the Church but particularly in the everyday: in the queue at the post office, in the canteen at work or school, in the changing room at the gym, in the pub, on the bus, in the care home...

When we are willing to open ourselves up, like the companions on the road to Emmaus, we too may come to experience God at work in unexpected people and places.

How is the Spirit nudging you to join God's work in the world and, in the process, deepen your faith as a follower of Jesus?

A disciple walks

During her sabbatical, the Revd Lesley Charlton, Minister of Kingston United Reformed Church, wanted to interact with as many different communities as possible, reflecting on what she found. This was something she felt that a train, bus or car journey could never achieve. Here, she shares her experiences of walking from southwest London to Beith, Scotland.

'Every morning, I woke to the sound of my alarm for an early start to get a much natural light as possible. After breakfast, I would put my boots on, pack up and set off.



‘No big decisions, just lots of little questions. Are my phones charged? Do I have a tissue? Is my water bottle full? Do I have snacks? Am I walking in the right direction? How much further do I have to go until the next stop? Especially for the last five miles each day, which nearly killed me.’ Every day I walked around 20 miles, which many people can do. But it is a challenge to face another 20 miles the next day, and the next, and the next, until you have walked the distance you have set yourself. Most people could do my job as a Minister of Word and Sacraments for a day. Listening, planning, praying, reading, visiting, preaching. But it is doing it the next day, and the next, and the next that makes it difficult. In my case, 35 years in ministry and 440 miles to my parents’ house in Ayrshire.

‘Like my journey to Scotland, much of Walking the Way of Jesus is small, dull steps in the right direction. It is about setting your intention and continuing your journey, no matter how tiring or challenging.

‘There was never a time when I was not going to do this. There was no way I was going to quit or stop. There were times when I was exhausted. There were times when I was moving very slowly and was vulnerable to making bad decisions, but the joy was in the countryside, the exploring, the freedom of each day and the achievement of doing the walk.’

Something to ponder

Have you ever had a reason to change direction? Have you experienced an unexpected change of plans, or occasions where you felt prompted to revisit some place? What has God shown you through the various journeys of your life? How might your findings help and inspire others?

A prayer

Friend who walks our way,
before the day is over
change the focus of our seeing
and help us to be aware of your presence.

Friend who walks our way,
before the day is over
capture our hearts and minds
and help us to hear you in the voices of unexpected people.

Friend who walks our way,
before the day is over
show us the path to follow
and help us to support those who have lost their way.

Friend who walks our way,
before the day is over
fill us with your love
and may your reflection be seen in us
as we break bread together.

(Excerpted from material by Francis Brienen,
URC Prayer Handbook 1995)

Suggested response

With friends, organise a walk around your community. As you walk, be prepared to stop, look and listen, asking where God is at work in the people and areas you explore.