

“OPENING MINDS”

Luke 24:36-49

Well, as the General Election draws ever closer, the spotlight has fallen this week on one person – an unlikely focus for the media’s interest, but on everyone’s television screens, radio bulletins and newspaper front pages on Wednesday and Thursday. I refer, of course, to Mrs Gillian Duffy, a redoubtable resident of Rochdale who took Mr Brown to task on a variety of issues when he chanced upon her in the street. Her little tirade might not have made such big news had it not been for the frustrated response of the Labour leader as he climbed back into his car, unaware that the microphones were still on and referred to her, of course, as “*a sort of bigoted woman*”.

Now, she may or may not be a bigoted woman – some of the things she said seemed to suggest that she was, but, then, aren’t we all when it comes to some issues? *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a bigot in a couple of ways, both of which use the term “*narrow-minded*” (and both of which, incidentally, suggest that a bigot is usually religious). There are, as I say, many people who would appear to be narrow-minded or closed-minded and we often assume that people who don’t think as we do are like that. But whatever the persistent Mrs Duffy may or may not have been, Mr Brown and his aides might have pondered the words of Eugene Ionesco, a French playwright of the Theatre of the Absurd school, who said, “*It isn’t what people think that’s important [although we might quarrel with him on that point] but the reason they think what they think.*”

We’ve just read of another situation in which a leader comes upon a group of closed-minded people, but this encounter finishes very differently from the one which happened on the streets of Rochdale on Wednesday. The Risen Jesus Christ is out and about around Jerusalem on the evening of Easter Day and bumps into, firstly, a couple of his followers on the way out to the village of Emmaus (in an earlier section of chapter 24 which we didn’t read), and then the main group of his disciples who are together in a house in the city. In v45, Luke tells us that “*he opened their minds*”, which clearly implies that up until that point their minds were closed or narrowed, their understanding was limited.

Those whom we would refer to as bigots or closed- or narrow-minded people, are those who usually cannot see beyond the limits of their own strongly held views and attitudes. And that’s demonstrated by their inability to grasp other points of view or see things from another perspective. This episode takes place, as we’ve said, on the evening of Easter Sunday, the day on which Jesus had been raised from the dead. It was an unusual occurrence and the disciples had difficulty getting their heads round it. If you look through this chapter 24 of Luke’s Gospel, you’ll find that he remarks on it several times. Although the tomb where Jesus was buried is empty, and although some people claim to have seen Jesus alive, there is still an attitude of closed-mindedness, an understandable reluctance to accept that Jesus is alive.

In v11, the disciples do not believe the report of the women who have returned from the tomb. Indeed, they dismiss their report as “*nonsense*”. Peter runs off to see for himself, and is left not convinced but “*wondering*” (v12). The two people walking out to Emmaus don’t even recognise Jesus when he’s walking along talking to them. And when Jesus finally shows up in the house in Jerusalem, the disciples are “*still talking about it*” (v36), still not sure what or whom to believe. They don’t appear to be able to believe that Jesus is actually alive. Their minds are still closed to the reality of the resurrection.

Now, of course, their attitude – like the attitude of Mrs Duffy – had been influenced by certain factors. Why, as Ionesco would ask, do they think as they do? Again, Luke gives us some clues here. Quite apart from the natural human response that people just don’t come alive again after they’ve died, there is a real whirlwind of stuff going on in their heads at this time. We read that they are “*frightened*” (v37), “*troubled*” (v38) (the Greek word means really agitated and anxious), plagued by doubts (v38), affected by disbelief even in the presence of Jesus (v41) and overwhelmed with amazement (41). All these things have conspired to narrow down their field of view, to close their minds to the possibilities of resurrection, to turn them, in the strict sense of the word, into bigots.

So Jesus calmly sits down, has a bit of broiled fish, and starts to explain things. Luke describes it as “*opening their minds*” (v45). He takes them into their own Scriptures, pointing them towards texts and prophecies that would have been very familiar to them, but they had failed to see the significance of them due to the way in which they were thinking. It’s not the first time that he has said, as he does in v44, that this was actually all inevitable, that the events of the past few days were actually predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures, in their Bible. And he opens their minds as he takes them on a tour of the whole range of writings in those Scriptures – the Law or *Torah*, the works of the Prophets, and *The Writings*, which are made up mainly of *The Psalms*.

“Look,” he says, “this is stuff you’ve heard read in the synagogue, stuff you’ve repeated yourselves on Sabbaths and at festivals. This is the story of your heritage, the narrative of God’s amazing activity amongst you. Can’t you see that what we’ve just been through is referred to in this whole story?” It had to happen, if those Scriptures were to be fulfilled. It says that the Christ, the Messiah will suffer, like Jesus has done – just look at *Psalms 22* or *Isaiah 52 & 53*. It says that he will die and then come back to life again – look at *Psalms 16:9-11* or *Isaiah 53:10,11*. It says that this is going to happen to make possible repentance on the part of humanity and forgiveness on the part of God – look at *Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3*. It says that there will be a worldwide mission to “*the nations*”, the Gentiles – it says that pretty well anywhere you care to look in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is explaining to them about all this, opening their minds to the glorious possibilities of the Kingdom of God, showing them the amazing ways in which God has planned to work and the even more amazing ways in which he is now accomplishing that. But they couldn’t see. This little episode always reminds me of conversations I used to have with a good friend in London, the secretary of the local synagogue. I can remember sitting in The Crown & Anchor on the day of Charles and Diana’s wedding (while Sally and his wife were watching the telly at home) trying to understand why Alan couldn’t see that what I believe is all based on what he believes. Somehow, like these first disciples, his mind was closed or narrowed so that he couldn’t see it.

That’s all based on what we now call the Old Testament. But Jesus goes on to say that these disciples, his followers, whose minds he has now opened, whose vision he has unlocked, will be witnesses of all this, will share with others this new open-mindedness, this new perspective on the world, on God and on salvation. “*You are witnesses of these things*,” he says (v48) – “I’ve shown you this – now get on and share it with everyone else!” And to help them in this extraordinary task they are to get what God has promised them – again something that has already been spoken of – the Holy Spirit, “*power from on high*”. Once again, this is stuff they should have seen coming, both from their knowledge of the Old Testament and from what they’ve heard Jesus say. And as we, the most recent followers of Jesus, read their story we can see that as part of the continually unfolding story of God’s dealings with humanity. Look, for example, at *Acts 26:22,23* or *1 John 1:1-4*. That’s, for us, the New Testament. Both Old and New Testaments bear witness to this tremendous activity of God in our world.

And what this world still needs today, what people are still desperate for, is just what Luke is recording here. This world, this city, this community needs Spirit-filled witnesses to the truth of the gospel, people who can say “This is all true and it all works. Just look at your own experience and then see it in the light of the Scriptures, the Bible.” Had we had the expected visit from the Gideons representative this morning, I’m sure he would have touched on that necessity of making the Bible available to all, because it is only with the help of that that we can make sense of this world.

The trouble is, most people’s minds – ours included – are narrowed or closed. The Scottish physicist Sir James Dewar, who was working early in the last century, is quoted as saying, “*Minds are like parachutes. They only function when they are open.*” It is particularly apparent now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as faith is, in the minds of many people, the preserve of bigots – but, ironically, those who call us bigots are those whose minds are closed most securely against the truths of the Christian gospel. Christianity has been pushed to the very margins of society and culture. In the popular consciousness, through the influence of the media, in creeping secularising legislation and through the pettiness of officials and jobsworths in councils and local authorities, the things we hold dear and by which we

believe all human activity should be governed are downgraded, ridiculed and ignored, so that people's perspective is narrowed, their attitudes prejudiced, their minds closed.

Of course, many people wouldn't be aware of this. So tightly closed are their minds that they are blissfully unaware of the possibilities and content just to live within the narrow confines of what they can see, feel and touch. They think that religion – and specifically Christian faith – is something odd; if worthy of anything, worthy only of their scorn. What's the reason for that? we ask with Ionesco. Well, partly it's to do with the continuing heritage of the Enlightenment, the dominance of rationalism in all that we do. It's a closed system of thought that sees everything as predictable and solvable, a system devoid of mystery and wonder. It's the idea that we can only really believe in what we can see, what we can measure, what we can quantify. That's why we are so driven, in every part of our lives, by targets, by objectives that we can measure. If you can't put it on a graph it's not worth doing. So our thought becomes limited, our ideas are predictable, our senses dulled by the constant eroding of anything to do with faith, which is not quantifiable or tameable.

And that, that world-view, that set of attitudes and values, that closed-mindset, is reinforced by all that surrounds us in our contemporary society. It's reinforced by our education system – which is itself rendered largely ineffective by a preoccupation with targets and tables – a system which reduces everything to formulae and technique but fails to encourage wonder and imagination. It's reinforced by our experience, as we find ourselves unable to cope with anything that doesn't happen as we believe it should, a mechanistic and predictable approach to life which has no room for the supernatural. Even the disciples had difficulty coping with the resurrection because they had no experience of returning from the dead. It's even reinforced in our churches by our dogma. Just reflect on what happens when something unusual happens – a revival, an outpouring of God's Holy Spirit, a miracle of healing. We have our own ideas of what God should do and how he should act, so this can't be anything to do with him. That's what the Pharisees said when Jesus healed – he must be in league with the Devil. That's why the Jewish people had such a problem with Jesus generally – he didn't fit in with what they expected of God, the parameters they had set for him.

But as we encounter the Risen Jesus Christ our minds are opened. He opens our minds to understand the Scriptures, to see the Big Picture of God's dealings with humanity, something beyond the little concerns of our everyday lives, something that cannot be counted or measured or domesticated, something that does not rely on targets and league tables, something that takes us out of the boxes we've created for ourselves. It helps us to make sense of what is going on around us and within us.

We see, as we look into the Bible why things are as they are. We recognise that, as Luke says, *"Everything must be fulfilled that is written ..."* (v44). That helps to explain the inevitability of our situation – that evil has infected the world and invaded the human heart, so we are fallen and fallible and frail. It shows us the consequences of allowing that evil to fester in our hearts and warns us that we have to face up to that in the light of eternity. This is God's sovereign word, his communication with humanity. And there, straight away is something that cannot be grasped by the closed mind – the idea that the Creator of the Universe, the awesome, tremendous, all-powerful King of kings and Lord of lords should want to speak to us, to communicate with us.

But it also shows us the amazing grace and compassion of a God who has watched as humanity has found itself mired deeper and deeper in sin and who has determined to provide a way out through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. Let Jesus Christ open your minds to a Kingdom in which there is justice and righteousness, liberty and peace, joy and fulfilment – a way of life which is counter-cultural because it doesn't rely on those closed systems and dead-end theories, but opens up eternal horizons in which we can enjoy the relationship with God that he first intended for us.

Let me ask you this this morning: Do you find life frustrating because you can see only one way ahead? Do you struggle because it looks as if things are not going to go well for you? Do you find yourself fearful not just of what is going to happen this week, but of what eternity holds for you? Allow Jesus to

open your mind. Allow him to help you understand these Scriptures, to see with a renewed sense of vision the possibilities that are sketched out here. Allow him to touch your life with his promised Holy Spirit who will remove those barriers and give you a glimpse into the future which God has for you with him. Things do not have to be this way. There is an alternative to the way you are living – pray that the Risen Lord Jesus Christ will open your mind and help you to discover it. And then, help you to share it.

Discussion notes on next page

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In this story, the disciples have closed-minds, a reluctance to accept that Jesus is alive. Their attitude has been influenced by certain factors. We read that they are "*frightened*" (v37), "*troubled*" (v38) (the Greek word means really agitated and anxious), plagued by doubts (v38), affected by disbelief even in the presence of Jesus (v41) and overwhelmed with amazement (v41). So Jesus starts to explain things. Luke describes it as "*opening their minds*" (v45). He takes them into their own Scriptures. It's not the first time that he has said, as he does in v44, that this was actually all inevitable, that the events of the past few days were actually predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures, in their Bible. And he opens their minds as he takes them on a tour of the whole range of writings in those Scriptures – the Law or *Torah*, the works of the Prophets, and *The Writings*, which are made up mainly of *The Psalms*.

It says that the Christ, the Messiah will suffer, like Jesus has done – just look at *Psalms 22* or *Isaiah 52 & 53*. It says that he will die and then come back to life again – look at *Psalms 16:9-11* or *Isaiah 53:10,11*. It says that this is going to happen to make possible repentance on the part of humanity and forgiveness on the part of God – look at *Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3*. It says that there will be a worldwide mission to "*the nations*", the Gentiles – it says that pretty well anywhere you care to look in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is explaining to them about all this, opening their minds to the glorious possibilities of the Kingdom of God, showing them the amazing ways in which God has planned to work and the even more amazing ways in which he is now accomplishing that. He goes on to say that these disciples "*are witnesses of these things*," he says (v48). And to help them in this extraordinary task they are to get what God has promised them – again something that has already been spoken of – the Holy Spirit, "*power from on high*". Once again, this is stuff they should have seen coming, both from their knowledge of the Old Testament and from what they've heard Jesus say. And as we, the most recent followers of Jesus, read their story we can see that as part of the continually unfolding story of God's dealings with humanity. Look, for example, at *Acts 26:22,23* or *1 John 1:1-4*. That's, for us, the New Testament. Both Old and New Testaments bear witness to this tremendous activity of God in our world.

And what this world still needs today, what people are still desperate for, is just what Luke is recording here. The trouble is, most people's minds – ours included – are narrowed or closed. "*Minds are like parachutes. They only function when they are open*" (James Dewar). That closed-mindset is reinforced by all that surrounds us in our contemporary society: our education system, our experience, even our dogma.

But as we encounter the Risen Jesus Christ our minds are opened. He opens our minds to understand the Scriptures, to see the Big Picture of God's dealings with humanity. It helps us to make sense of what is going on around us and within us: "*Everything must be fulfilled that is written ...*" (v44). That helps to explain the inevitability of our situation – that evil has infected the world and invaded the human heart, so we are fallen and fallible and frail. But it also shows us the amazing grace and compassion of a God who has watched as humanity has found itself mired deeper and deeper in sin and who has determined to provide a way out through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do many people think of Christians as bigoted? Are we?
2. Do you feel that Christianity has been marginalised in our society? Why/why not? If so, how has it happened?
3. Why do you think the disciples' minds needed to be opened? Is it the same with us today?
4. In what ways do you think the Old Testament points towards the coming of Jesus?

5. How can we help open people's minds? How can we make the Bible better known in our community?