

The Journey to Emmaus is the longest of all the resurrection accounts. On the surface, taken literally, it is yet further evidence given by witnesses that death was not the end of Jesus Christ – and at the time the gospel was written, this kind of evidence was still very important to people. But like all gospel narratives, there is much more going on below the surface.

The name 'Emmaus' is generic, a Hellenised version of the Hebrew 'Hammet' – meaning 'a warm spring of water'. In a hot, dry country, water is life.

Seven miles from Jerusalem: seven is a very particular number, and when the gospels give a specific number, it is always for a purpose. In numerical symbolism, three is the way – the journey – and four is the goal – the recognition of Jesus for who he is. Together, they make seven, so seven is the number that symbolises the whole story.

Because the name is generic, so is the journey. The journey is our own journey, from ignorance to wisdom, from blindness of heart to insight, from not knowing to realisation. And all the time the Lord Jesus is there, at the centre of ourselves, recognised or unrecognised. Fascinatingly, the two disciples tell Jesus all about Jesus – and of course they get it wrong, because they were projecting onto him their own assumptions, convictions, beliefs and emotions. Many of us do that every time we open our mouths to pray. Jesus counters this with his own account of himself and of how what happened to him was to fulfil the scriptures. The word in Greek used for this conversation is *homileo*, from which of course we get the word 'homily'.

The time, too, is meaningful: neither day nor night, but twilight. This is an in-between time. It could be any time. And the disciples were walking away from Jerusalem – away from the centre. Walking away from the centre in the shadows. In other words,

like us, they needed the Lord to set them right. That is why, at the end, the disciples, of course, go back to Jerusalem.

The gospel narrative has the structure and shape of the Eucharistic liturgy; the fact that there are two disciples reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew's gospel: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them." (18:20). The invitation from the two disciples for Jesus to stay with them is like the offering of the bread and wine in the liturgy, because they are given by the disciples and the Lord uses them to reveal his presence. The moment that they recognise him is totally Eucharistic: "Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them." Yet Jesus has been present all the time: present in their shared sadness, in the unveiling of the scriptures, in companionship.