



“Footprints and Echoes”

Bible Studies

7th Forum of the NCCA, 9-13 July 2010

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Introduction

Every year the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity prepare the texts of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, with an original draft prepared by a local, ecumenical group writing from one of the regions of the world. The material for 2010 was prepared in Scotland because of the 2010 Edinburgh Conference, marking the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference and with it the beginning of the modern Ecumenical Movement.

The biblical text chosen by the Action by Churches Together in Scotland team is the entire chapter of Luke 24, Luke’s account of the Resurrection. Although the text is long it holds together as a single literary unit. The words of Jesus at the end of this chapter—the theme of the 2010 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity—are addressed to the disciples of Jesus in 2010 as much as they were on that first Easter day: “You are witnesses of these things.”

Day 1: Luke 24.1-27

Luke’s account of the first Easter day is the longest of the four gospels. At the centre of Luke’s story of the Resurrection is the episode of the Road to Emmaus, from verses 13-35. The strange thing—or the wondrous thing—is that the people in this story are not the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples. There are no angels, no Peter or Mary Magdalene, all of whom appear in verses 1-12, where we hear the news of the Resurrection, but where Jesus has yet to appear. The Emmaus story is about two completely unknown people, Cleopas and his companion; was this a friend? His wife? A relative? A partner? A son or daughter? Because Luke gives us no hints about who Cleopas is, let alone his companion, we are left to our own imaginations, as the works of artists who have portrayed this story so amply demonstrate. I think that Cleopas and his companion are you and me, and all the ordinary people who have responded to Jesus in one way or another. And it is to these unknowns that the Risen One first appears in Luke’s Gospel.

The discovery of the empty tomb was the experience of relatively few people. But the news spread quickly so that by the end of the day the two disciples trudging back to their village had heard it as well. But rather than receiving the news with joy, Luke tells us that they were sad. They didn’t believe it. I think that they were so traumatized by the events in Jerusalem that they were in no position to receive anything. And they are separated from the Jerusalem community, what they call “our group,” isolated and walking away. Until they are joined by the stranger, who talks to them, listens to their feelings, listens for their questions, and then opens up the Scriptures as they walked. Upon later reflection, they recalled that their hearts were burning within them as he proclaimed/explained the Scriptures.

The theme of this conference is “Footprints.” When I hear this word today I first think of an “ecological footprint.” Or, I think of that wonderful story of footprints in the sand, the double set and the single set. It also recalls the footprints that were left on that dusty road from Jerusalem to Emmaus by Cleopas, his companion, and the Risen Jesus. And then there are the footprints on the road *back* to Jerusalem. Not only did they walk and leave footprints, but they also talked and left echoes of those conversations in Luke’s gospel.

At the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910 a journey began, the ecumenical journey, which has left footprints and echoes in directions that people 100 years ago could never have imagined. There have been so many conversations since then, so many dialogues between Christians; in so many ways, the echoes of their conversations resonate with our own, about the Risen Lord, and with the Risen Lord.

The one decision that came out of the World Missionary Conference was to form a continuation committee to continue and to deepen cooperation between the missionary societies. It was a unanimous decision, and the delegates were so amazed, and so moved, that they rose to sing the Doxology together. A new phase of Christianity began in which they began a journey together, not in competition, not in isolation, but a journey together with the Lord and with each other that would lead all the way to this Seventh Forum of the National Councils of Churches of Australia in Canberra. We are the heirs of these things.

But at the beginning, and perhaps today as well, the ecumenical journey, like the journey to Emmaus, begins with strangers. The unrecognised Jesus was a stranger to Cleopas; Cleopas and his companion are strangers to us; his companion will always remain a stranger. They are estranged from the Jerusalem community, from who they have walked away.

But as they journeyed together, leaving their two sets of footprints on the road, something changed, because of the third set. They went from sadness to hearts burning within them; from a sense of pointless loss and unsettling news to having a sense of meaning. They saw how their own stories and the story of Jesus fit within the broader framework of the biblical narrative. There was a dialogue. There was change, and we have been caught up in the echoes and footprints of that change ever since.

The great “burning hearts” insight of Edinburgh 1910 was the churches’ mission and message of reconciliation in Christ was distorted by their divisions. The vision that was born in 1910 was not merely church-cooperation, but of Christian unity. The insight came not from the Europeans or North Americans, but from the young churches of Asia, who linked the call to Jesus’ prayer in John 17. 21, “that they may be one”.

There were some who asked what it is that keeps us apart. People like Anglican bishop Charles Brent, their hearts burning from the experience of Edinburgh, saw that the way forward was dialogue; conversation about the questions of the faith and ordering of the churches that kept them apart. And so in 1910, plans began for a world conference on Faith and Order, which after years of planning and the horrors of the First World War, took place in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1927. Around that table of Faith and Order the churches encountered each other for the first time in a new way. Leaders and theologians did not attack or justify positions, they just introduced what they believed and how their different churches were ordered or structured. In the beginning it was a dialogue of strangers, who

knew really did not know one another, although caricatures, historic condemnations, memories of past conflict were alive and well. And something happened to them in Lausanne. They were no longer strangers and aliens. They saw Christ in one another. They could show that there was far more in common that united them in Christ than that which separated them from each other. And they knew themselves to be citizens together with the saints and members of the same household of God. (Ephesians 2.19)

Listen to their words to the churches in 1927:

God's Spirit has been in the midst of us. It was He who called us hither. His presence has been manifest in our worship, our deliberations and our whole fellowship. He has discovered us to one another. He has enlarged our horizons, quickened our understanding, and enlivened our hope. We have dared and God has justified our daring. We can never be the same again. Our deep thankfulness must find expression in sustained endeavour to share the visions vouchsafed us here with those smaller home groups where our lot is cast.

This was an Emmaus experience for those who were part of Faith and Order in 1927, and the churches they represented. The dialogues between the churches have continued ever since, on varying issues, at various speeds, with varying successes. But the Faith and Order movement, a movement which seeks to reconcile separated Christians by dialogue, by talking and walking together, by learning from one another, by recognizing and being recognised by the Risen Christ, includes us all:

God's Spirit has been in the midst of us. It was He who called us hither. His presence has been manifest in our worship, our deliberations and our whole fellowship. He has discovered us to one another. We have dared and God has justified our daring. We can never be the same again.

Questions:

1. What journey has your church been on in the past one hundred years with other Christian communities? How have you journeyed with other Christians in your own lives?
2. What dialogues has your church embarked upon with other churches, and how have they brought you closer to that unity for which Christ prays?
3. In what ways have the insights or experiences of another or other churches been an instance of the Risen Christ opening the Scriptures to you and your community?
4. With whom or what other Christian community do you need to journey on your own road to Emmaus?

Task:

1. What verse from Luke 24.1-27 resonates most strongly with where you are this morning?
2. What verse resonates most strongly with the dialogue within your table-group this morning? Why?
3. Each group will in turn read its chosen verse in plenary.

Day 2: Luke 24.28-35

As they reached their home in Emmaus, hospitality demanded that they invite the stranger to stay with them, because it was almost evening and the day was now over. But at the meal, the guest becomes the host, as he takes the bread, blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then, their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

When they see him, they don't recognise him; when they recognise him, they don't see him. What is going on here? The answer is in the fourfold action of Jesus in the meal: taking, blessing/giving thanks, breaking, and giving the bread. These are exactly the actions of Jesus in the Last Supper narratives in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul. They are the same four actions in all the feeding miracles in all four gospels. They are also the four-fold action of the Eucharist in the ancient church, and in the celebration of the Eucharist in many liturgical traditions today: the preparation of the gifts, the Eucharistic prayer, the breaking of the bread and Holy Communion. The entire story is liturgical: the community gathers on Sunday, the day of resurrection; the Scriptures are proclaimed; the table is prepared, the blessing said, the bread broken, and the community of Cleopas and his companion are fed by Christ.

This is where the ordinariness and obscurity of Cleopas and his companion give such power to the story. They are like you and me who did not visit the empty tomb, who missed the angels, missed Mary Magdalene and Peter. It is as if Luke is telling those of us who were not there that the Risen Christ meets us as well as Cleopas and his companion, as we encounter the Risen One as he gathers us with him on Sunday, the day of Resurrection, to proclaim the biblical word of hope, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

The flash of intuition that the Lord is risen indeed was not the result of their careful planning or well-thought out theology, but it is the Lord's doing in the context of time, community, story, meal, and prayer. It was not an idea, but an experience of the Risen Christ that led them to the basic foundation of Christian belief: "The Lord is risen; he is truly risen!"

If this is the point of Luke's Emmaus story—and most biblical commentators suggest that this is precisely what is going on—then there are implications for the unity of the Church, or rather, for its disunity. For, here, gathered around its Risen Lord, the Church, the Christian community is most authentically itself. It is from here that its life and mission flows and returns.

The most scandalous way that Christian division has been expressed from earliest times has been breaking Eucharistic communion with one another. Equally scandalous in the long history of Christian disunity has been naming the other's Eucharistic theologies and practices as heretical. In the event that Luke's Gospel identifies as the privileged place of encounter with the Risen Lord, we *all* told others Christians that that they got it wrong.

Faith and Order was born in the Eucharist at Edinburgh 1910, when the Anglican delegates who celebrated the Eucharist every day became increasingly aware of the discrepancy between the growing Emmaus experience of unity at the conference, and the Anglican practice at the time that made it impossible to celebrate and receive the Eucharist together.

That sense of “wrongness” impelled them to seek to remove whatever issues of faith and order that kept believer apart in the Eucharist.

Ever since, Faith and Order has provided a space where the divided churches have shared with each other what they believe and experience in the Eucharist. The mandate of Faith and Order is to “proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ, and to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and *in one Eucharistic fellowship*.” One of the gentle but at the same time disturbing surprises has been just how much we already have in common in the Eucharist, and how much we owe to one another in terms of liturgical renewal. They could show that there was far more in common that united them in Christ than that which separated them from each other. This was most poignantly achieved in the 1982 convergence text called *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, known simply by its abbreviation, BEM.”.

People don’t read BEM very much anymore. It’s even hard to find a copy, even after a million were produced in over 39 printings and in 40 languages! But without knowing it, many people receive BEM every Sunday. Because so many of those involved in the BEM process were also engaged in liturgical renewal in their churches, our service books were being revised as BEM was being prepared. There was an order of celebration based on BEM called the Lima Liturgy. It was seldom used, but it became the model for a whole series of Eucharistic liturgies and service books from 1982 to the present. It is no wonder that there is a family resemblance in the way that churches celebrate the Eucharist, in terms of shape of the liturgy, music and hymns, common lectionary, and common Eucharistic prayers.

Before, during, and after the publication of BEM, an extraordinary thing happened: when Christians visited each other’s churches, especially at celebrations of the Eucharist, they felt “at home.” It was not identical, but it was familiar, giving rise to a deep desire to receive Christ in Holy Communion with and from another. That is a different kind of ecumenism, not of theologians or church leaders, but of ordinary people like Cleopas and his companion, a grassroots ecumenism of those who encounter the presence of Christ in the other, who hear the echoes of themselves, their prayers, their songs, their stories, in the prayer of the other and *desire* to feed on that presence as did Cleopas and his companion. And they knew themselves to be citizens together and members of the same household of God.

For the vast majority of Christians—Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant churches—receiving communion is seen as the goal of Christian unity. For others, it is seen as the means to unity, or as a pastoral measure of hospitality in the interim. Some Christians *will* not receive in another church, for the sake of unity. Others *will* receive, also for the sake of unity. Both positions place being in Eucharistic communion at the heart of the ecumenical movement—not just receiving communion from one another, which is relatively easy, but receiving one another, being in communion with another community, and encountering with the other what Cleopas and his companion found with the stranger: the presence of the Risen Christ.

“Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him, and he vanished from their sight.”

Questions:

1. What are some of your experiences of the prayer of other Christian traditions?

2. What is your church's position on Eucharistic hospitality, and why? How do you experience churches that follow a practice different to your own?
3. In what ways have the insights or experiences of another or other churches helped you to recognise the Risen Christ in the breaking of the Bread?

Task:

1. What verse from Luke 24.28-35 resonates most strongly with where you are this morning?
2. What verse resonates most strongly with the dialogue within your table-group this morning?
3. Each group will in turn read its chosen verse in plenary.

Day 3: Luke 24.33-51

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry acknowledges the many names given to the sacramental meal in bread and wine in which we meet Jesus. In chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel and throughout the Acts of the Apostles it is called the "breaking of the bread." St Paul calls it "The Lord's Supper." The early church called it Eucharist, from the Greek *eucharistia* meaning "thanksgiving", recalling the third of Jesus' actions in the Last Supper, the feeding miracles, and the Emmaus story, when Jesus gave thanks. Eastern Christians call it the Divine Liturgy, from the Greek *leitourgia*, meaning "work of the people." In the early Western tradition, it was simply called "Mass", from the Latin *missa* meaning "sent", from the dismissal by the deacon at the very end of the Eucharist: *ite, missa est*, meaning "go, you are sent." And from this we get the word "mission" and words like "commission", "transmission", "dismissal" and "Mass".

We often forget, especially those who come from traditions shaped by the Reformation, that the word "Mass" points to the deep connection between Eucharist and mission, between the Resurrection and mission. In his account of Emmaus, Luke tells us that after Cleopas and his companion recognised Jesus in the breaking of the bread, they did not complain about the sermon and turn in for the night. Rather, their experience of the Risen Lord sent them on mission, back to Jerusalem. Their experience of the Risen Christ was such that they were impelled to witness to what they had heard and seen and tasted. They return to Jerusalem, and to the community of the Lord gathered there, and are again in communion with them, for they too had news: "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon."

Then Jesus appears to them all, and says to them words that we know from our experience of worship: "Peace be with you." Luke tells us that after showing himself to them, he shares a meal with them as well, and then in reverse order begins to proclaim the scriptures, opening their minds to the message "that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise again from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

"You are witnesses of these things." This is Luke's version of the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel. The commission in Luke's Gospel is located after the proclaimed

biblical word Supper with the Lord, just like the deacon's *ite, missa est*. Like the language around the word Mass, mission in the story of Emmaus is intrinsically linked with the Eucharist. The Orthodox tradition speaks of the Liturgy after the Liturgy.

Edinburgh 1910 had as one of its goals increased cooperation amongst the Western missionary societies. What actually happened was a vision of so much more, a vision of a united Church. It was a moment of conversion for the delegates. Charles Brent, who would lead the Faith and Order movement, said of Edinburgh 1910:

I was converted. I learned that something was working that was not of man in that conference; that the Spirit of God... was preparing a new era in the history of Christianity.

During these past days a new vision has been unfolded to us. But whenever God gives a vision He also points to some new responsibility, and you and I, when we leave this assembly, will go away with some fresh duties to perform.

The vision of Church unity, not missionary cooperation, did not emerge from the Western professors of ecclesiology, but from the younger churches of India, Japan, and China. One of the most famous speeches at Edinburgh 1910 came from one of the few delegates from China, Cheng Ching Yi:

You have sent to us missionaries who have made Jesus Christ known to us, and we thank you for this. But, you have also brought to us your divisions; we ask you to preach the Gospel and to let Jesus Christ himself rise up in the hearts of our people by the action of his Holy Spirit adapted to their needs, adapted also to the dispositions of our peoples, so that there will be a Church of Christ in Japan, the Church in China, in India, etc. Deliver us from all "isms" by which you have affected the preaching of the Gospel amongst us.

The vision of Christian unity in Edinburgh 1910, and the ecumenical movement which sprang from it, has been related solely to mission. In 1910 they saw with striking clarity that Christian disunity, competition, parallelism, isolation and hostility was the greatest obstacle to mission. How was it possible to proclaim a gospel of reconciliation—a gospel of repentance and forgiveness to all the nations—when the bearers of that gospel were unreconciled amongst themselves? The hypocrisy around Christian disunity continues to block the mission of the church today because disunited Christianity distorts the Gospel.

The operative word is disunity, not diversity. God loves diversity. The diversity amongst Christians speaks of the health and vitality of Christianity, and the freedom of the Spirit to blow in different cultures and languages and experiences as the Spirit wills. The vision of Edinburgh 1910 was never a uniform Church, but a united one, one that preserved, safeguarded, and celebrated diversity in one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

When Jesus says "You are witnesses of these things" in Jerusalem or Edinburgh or Canberra, it is always in the plural, to a communion of wondrously different people.

In Matthew's gospel, the great commission is to make "disciples of all the nations." In Luke it is subtly but significantly different: it is to proclaim to the nations repentance and

forgiveness in Jesus' name, and to be witnesses that the Messiah suffered and rose from the dead on the third day.

Being a witness to the things of Jesus today is understood in wondrously diverse ways, from evangelism, to giving a reason for the hope that is within us, to caring for justice and peace, healing and reconciliation, and stewardship of creation. The word for Martyr is from the Greek word for "witness". In *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* Faith and Order says:

Through the eucharist the all-renewing grace of God penetrates and restores human personality and dignity. The eucharist involves the believer in the central event of the world's history. As participants in the eucharist, therefore, we prove inconsistent if we are not actively participating in this ongoing restoration of the world's situation and the human condition (Eucharist 20, BEM).

All of these things bear witness to the death and resurrection of Christ, and proclaim the message of forgiveness to all the nations. I think of wise words from Francis of Assisi to the early Franciscans: "Preach the Gospel; use words only when necessary."

Questions:

1. What are the areas of mission for your local worshipping community?
2. In what ways is (or could) your experience of Sunday worship be linked with mission?
3. In what ways can you imagine that mission would be changed by the diverse local communities engaging in mission together?
4. What are the differences in mission between a social service organization, a philanthropic society, and worshipping Christian communities?

Task:

1. What verse from Luke 24.33-51 resonates most strongly with where you are this morning?
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