

Answers to Our Deep Questions
Luke 24:13-27
April 26, 2020

I just finished reading a challenging book by James Hunter, **To Change the World**, which opens with these words: *how is religious faith possible in the late modern world?* He goes on to answer this basic question in a deep, academic discussion that demands every sinew of concentration. Where do we look to answer our deep questions about life, death, the future, the purpose of life, ethics, God?

At the popular level let me introduce Alfie at the beginning of the disintegration of the modern world. In the film the song goes: *What's it all about Alfie, Is it just for the moment we live...As sure as I believe there's a heaven above Alfie, I know there's something much more Something even non-believers can believe in I believe in love, Alfie Without true love we just exist, Alfie*

Alfie's question in the 1966 film has become an even more urgent question today. We now live in a post-Christian and post-modern world. What are the implications of this new world?

First, it means that objective knowledge and objective values that held society together no longer function. This is partly why church has come under such universal suspicion today. In modernity or pre 1950, there was a general acceptance of commonly held beliefs. It was a pretty uniform society with a widely accepted set of beliefs. Today pluralism dominates every segment of society. In Modernity two plus two equaled four, black and white were clear to everyone, right and wrong was taught to children as fundamental to life. Today in a society where pluralism influences every institution, of government and business, perhaps even churches, a coherent vision of life is no longer viable. Today the idea of having objective knowledge or universal values seems only a memory from the past. Today we live in a world where truth or facts are all up for debate. There are no objective values, only preferences. At the heart of our post-modern world, therefore, lie the dominant forces of pluralism, relativism, and subjectivism.

Second, modernity had an agreed narrative. At the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, it was commonly believed that we were moving steadily toward enlightenment. The industrial, scientific breakthroughs would take us to a bright new day. Unfortunately, optimism died with the 20th century wars and disruptions. We now see that this narrative, or the ideas on which it was based, was oppressive, imperialist and self-serving. We no longer have confidence in an overarching meta story that holds society together.

Third, for previous generations it was a much smaller step to move from society's accepted values and beliefs to a Christian commitment and worldview. Simply put, the step was small because church and state shared common ground on facts, truth, ethics and worldview. It was a fairly common notion that to be Canadian was to be Christian! Today such a step, from a society informed by pluralism and relativism and a commonly accepted view of life deeply influenced by these forces, is almost impossible. Today it's a huge leap to faith, a much bigger leap for us than it was for our parents and grandparents.

In our present post-Christian society what we as Christians need to recover is a ***reason for the faith*** that Peter reminds us to have: ***Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence (1Peter 3:15ff)***

To do this we need to listen again to the conversation between the couple on the road to Emmaus and the stranger who met them. If we listen closely, we will hear that Jesus must be understood as part of a much bigger story. We have to locate him within the Jewish scriptures and their faith traditions. It is the story that Jesus himself learned at his mother's knee and in the synagogue in Nazareth.

Let's remind ourselves afresh what this story is about. It is a story of God choosing the family of Abraham through whom the world would be blessed. But it doesn't seem like a very successful story. Israel loses its way and end up in exile, a captivity that extends into Jesus time: the empires of Assyria, Persia, Greece and finally Rome ruled Israel's lives and conquered their beloved Jerusalem. Into this political and social world of Roman power stepped a young peasant from Galilee proclaiming that the kingdom of God had arrived.

The stranger responds to their disenchantment. Their hope had died with Jesus' crucifixion. The stranger responds to their disillusionment: ***Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. (Luke 24:25ff)***

Jesus said that God's plan was fulfilled in him. It would not be accomplished, as the Jews of his day thought, through military victory over Rome. It would happen through the birth of the new community of Israel founded on faith in him. What was truly revolutionary about his message was that life did have meaning, that there was a future new world ahead, that forgiveness was possible in him. And all of this was one that bypassed the ancient cult of the temple and its elaborate system of sacrifice, as well as all the legal and priestly demands inherent to that system. Rather it was founded on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

As a Christian today I sympathize with and have to live within the present climate of post-modernity. I know now that there was much about modernity that was unhealthy, oppressive and arrogant. But it's still difficult to live within the despair and uncertainty and confusion of post modernity. In so many ways our decision to follow this Lord Christ stands diametrically opposed to all that post-modernity and post-Christendom now lives within as their reality. I may at times, as you may, feel just like these two disciples on the way to Emmaus whose world has been turned upside down by Jesus' death. Our world sometimes feels like it has been turned upside down. So, we listen to the stranger who meets us on this road and who reminds us of the true Meta story, a story big enough and true enough to claim our hearts and lives. Post-modernity's story is simply too small for us!

Truth is that in our post-modern world people have been stripped of meaning and a story to live by because it offers little beyond suspicion, confusion, skepticism and despair about life, about meaning, about the future. The biblical story reminds us that Jesus has conquered death and hell and the grave. His story offers hope, peace and love. New Testament writings and faith do answer our

fundamental questions: what is the meaning of life? where do I find purpose? Is there such a thing as Truth? Yes, yes, over and over again these scriptures assure us that there is a story that is true, one that makes sense of life has meaning.

Those of us who embrace this Lord in faith have a responsibility to share it by our words and actions. As Jesus would challenge this new community to do, and as Peter later reminds them, we as inhabitants of this story need to share it. We need to be a part of the answer to the questions post-modernity is asking. Or to reassert our opening question: *how is religious faith possible in the late modern world?* Well it really is possible and it's a grand story we have to share. And the bonus is that its true!

Amen