COINCIDENCE? I THINK NOT

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Category: Observations

Have you noticed the parallels between the Emmaus Road narrative in Luke 24 and the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8? Neither had I till someone pointed them out to me.

- Both stories involve a journey from Jerusalem to somewhere; Emmaus in one case, Ethiopia in the other.
- In both cases, the person/people making the journey are asking profound questions. The disciples want to understand what happened to Jesus, while the Ethiopian was wrestling with the book of Isaiah.
- A mysterious stranger approached the travellers in both stories.
- The stranger led them in an extended Bible study which pointed them to Jesus.
- The penultimate act in each story is a sacrament; communion at Emmaus and a baptism in the desert.
- Lastly, the stranger (Jesus in one case, Philip in the other) disappeared.

Now it could be that these parallels are simply coincidence; but I'm pretty sure that's not the case. From the introductions to his Gospel and the book of Acts we know that Luke was a careful researcher and writer. He checked his sources and made conscious decisions about what he included. I'm pretty sure that if Luke wrote these stories in a way that they reflect each other, he intended to do so.

This raises two questions. The first is why do we fail to spot the way that one story echoes the other? I think this is down to the way that we tend to read the Bible. For the most part, we read a chapter or two at the most; sometimes we concentrate on just a verse or a paragraph. There is nothing wrong with doing this, we need to study Scripture in depth, but we also need to read large chunks and allow the broader message to sink in. Luke wrote the Gospel and Acts as two volumes of the same work. If we actually sat down and read them in this way (its not helped by them being separated in most Bibles), we'd encounter these two stories within about twenty minutes of each other and the parallels would be much more obvious. But how many of us have ever done that?

However, the more important question is why did Luke write these two stories in such a way that they echo each other clearly? Without being able to interview him, we can't be 100% sure, but I've got a theory.

The Emmaus road narrative is a key point in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus appears to two of his followers; not to the better known disciples such as Peter and John, but to Cleopas (about whom we know next to nothing) and one other who isn't even named. As they walk along, Jesus demonstrates that his life and message were consistent with the teachings of the Old Testament and then he revealed himself by breaking bread and sharing wine. The message is clear; Jesus really did rise from the dead, according to the Scriptures, and his resurrection is for all people, not just the closest disciples.

Move on eight chapters. When we meet the Ethiopian, something outstanding is about to happen. Up till now, the church was essentially a Jewish phenomenon. Thousands were converted on the day of Pentecost, but they were all from the Jewish diaspora. The message had reached Samaria, but they were closely related to the Jews, too. Now, for the first time, a real foreigner, a non-Jew from a far-away land was to become a follower of Jesus and get baptised. At this point, where the Gospel makes its first significant break from Jewish culture, Luke writes in a way that takes us back to the Emmaus road.

It's as if he is saying; "Look, it's OK. It's the same risen Jesus, the one who appeared to disciples that you've never even heard of and broke bread with them - that's the Jesus that this foreigner is trusting in. The resurrection really is for everyone. And I mean, everyone."

It took a long time before the church really understood it's multiracial, multilingual nature, but here in two linked stories, Luke gently drives the lesson home.