

THE ROAD TO
EMMAUS

Companions for the journey through life

HELEN JULIAN CSF

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INTRODUCTION

The Christian life is often described as a journey or a pilgrimage. Like all journeys, it can be enriched by companions—those who walk with us, sharing the ups and downs, perhaps able to offer some wisdom from their own experience of the journey. We may find companions in our church or prayer group, or perhaps at a Christian festival or conference, but we can also find them among the saints and writers of past centuries.

The seven figures from British spirituality whom you will meet in this book are, I hope, good guides on this pilgrimage through the Christian life. Through their lives and work, they illuminate key themes—prayer, reading the scriptures, sin and penitence, community life and service to one another, faith, grace and worship, death and resurrection. The seven are all authors, so if any become particular friends and guides to you during your journey through this book, you can continue to travel with them by exploring further their own writings.

The journey of this book takes you from joy—the joy of creation—through places of darkness and struggle and places of light, encouragement and growth, to the rediscovered joy of re-creation.

Along the way there are opportunities to put into practice some of what the companions are offering as their particular gift. Julian of Norwich, the last of the companions, wrote of her own book, ‘This book is begun by God’s gift and his grace; but it is not yet performed.’¹ To be really effective, this book needs to be ‘performed’—put into practice in ways that engage body, spirit, and mind—which is why you will find a section headed ‘Performance’ at the end of each week’s readings.

All of the suggested activities can be carried out on your own if that is how you are using the book. If you are using it in a group, I recommend that each of you commit yourself to trying at least one

of the suggestions each week, and then, when you meet, sharing with each other what you did and how it worked for you. You might also like to share what you found helpful or puzzling in the week's readings. There are no right or wrong answers; anything that draws you closer to God and helps you to reflect on your pilgrimage of faith is valuable.

Don't feel that you have to follow the daily reading format exactly if that doesn't suit you. You may choose to read several days at once, and then have a day or more free to spend on one of the activities.

Our Christian journey is never made alone, however it may sometimes feel. The great company of our fellow travellers extends through time and space; through your reading of this book, may some of these companions become real friends and guides to you.

THOMAS TRATHERNE



Day 1

ENJOYING THE WORLD

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day...

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

GENESIS 1:1–5; 2:4B–8

On Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent, in churches all over the world, worshippers have a cross of ash marked on their foreheads. With it go the words, 'Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return', words drawing on this passage of Genesis and used also in the Anglican burial service.

It seems a suitably penitential but perhaps rather depressing start

to Lent. It is a reminder of mortality, of the fragility of life, and of the reality that we will all end as anonymous dust, some sooner, some later.

But it can also be a positive reminder that we are created beings, who can celebrate our creation and our Creator. Our very existence rests on the God who formed us and breathed life into us, and who continues to provide us with what we need to live—air and water and light. As Christians, we belong to a faith that values the things of the earth, seeing them as gifts of God. In Lent, in many churches, they are used powerfully for their symbolism: the ash of Ash Wednesday, the oil blessed by the bishop for use in anointing during the coming year, the water for the foot-washing on Maundy Thursday, and the new fire kindled on Easter Day. We are made of the earth, and our life is rooted in it.

Thomas Traherne, our first companion, would have sympathized with this view. He himself died in his 30s, in 1674, and it seemed for a long time that he had joined the company of the anonymous dead. He wrote many meditations, in prose and poetry, but none were published during his lifetime and it was only the chance discovery of a manuscript on a second-hand book barrow in Farringdon Road, London, in 1896 that brought him to a new and appreciative audience.

The known facts of his life are few. He was born in Hereford, around 1637, the son of a shoemaker. He was educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, during the Commonwealth, and then appointed rector of the parish of Credenhill near Hereford, in 1657. When the monarchy was restored, he was ordained in the Anglican Church. In 1667 he became chaplain to the Lord Keeper of the Seals, who had his household at Teddington, Middlesex, and it was there that Traherne died.

With the restoration of the monarchy came also the newly restored Book of Common Prayer, and Traherne valued its emphasis on a regular pattern of prayer with others, made up largely of psalms and scripture. He also valued its sanctification of time through the various seasons, special festivals and saints' days of the year. But

it is for his love of creation, above all, that Traherne is known and appreciated today. He always found the world beautiful, writing in his poem 'Nature', 'The world's fair beauty set my soul on fire.'¹ People were not left out of this appreciation: Traherne was gregarious and sociable. In one of his private notebooks he wrote, 'Thou, Lord, hast made thy servant a sociable creature for the praise of thy name; a lover of company.'² He always remembered having seen, as a child, an empty banqueting hall transformed as it filled up with 'lords and ladies and music and dancing'. 'I perceived,' he wrote, 'that men and women are, when well understood, a principal part of our true felicity.'³

So Traherne enjoyed the world not for himself alone, but also in order to lead others to the same enjoyment. In one of his most famous passages, he writes powerfully of a rapturous enjoyment of the world, an enjoyment made deeper because there are others with whom to share it.

You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

*Yet further; you never enjoy the world aright, till you so love the beauty of enjoying it, that you are covetous and earnest to persuade others to enjoy it.'*⁴

PRAYER

Creator God, thank you for having created me, and for sustaining me through your gifts. Make me more aware of your presence in your creation, and eager to bring others to know you. Amen.