

Identifying the risen Christ: some reflections on the epistemology and theology of the road to Emmaus story

1. Introduction

I have long been intrigued by a recurring feature of the accounts of Jesus's resurrection in the New Testament. At various points, in apparently quite independent stories, which do not seem to be variations on a single, initial story, people who knew Jesus very well prior to his death appear to struggle to recognise him in his resurrected state. Given the stubborn presence of this narrative feature across different resurrection reports, there is perhaps some reason to think that this difficulty in identifying the risen Christ, or some cognate phenomenon, forms part of the earliest traditions concerning the resurrection appearances.

A very well-known example of this failure to recognise the resurrected Jesus is provided by the story of Mary Magdalen's meeting him at the tomb where his body had been interred, when she mistakes him for a gardener. In this account, she sees Jesus and does not recognise him, and then hears him address her (when he says: 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?') and still does not recognise him. It is only when he speaks to her by name (saying simply: 'Mary') that she realises that it is Jesus who is addressing her (John 20:16).¹ Another example of the same sort of narrative sequence follows shortly after, when the disciples are fishing on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus calls to them from the shore. The text reads: 'Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.' (John 21:4) In due course, having followed Jesus's instructions about where to cast their net, the disciples come ashore with their catch and Jesus invites them to have breakfast. The text continues: 'Now none of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.' (John 21:12) Here again, the story seems to foreground the idea that identifying Jesus is in some way difficult: the disciples do not recognise him initially, and if they do not ask 'Who are you?' that is, we are told, because they dare not ask this question, and not because there is no reason to ask it, because it is simply obvious who he is.

There is another text where this motif of the unrecognisability of the resurrected Christ is perhaps still more evident, and this is the text I want to take as my focus here.² This further story is recorded in the Gospel of Luke, rather than, as in the first two cases, John. This is, of course, the 'road to Emmaus' story.

¹ All translations are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament text.

² While I shall not discuss other resurrection reports, there is good reason to think that the theme of Jesus's unrecognisability is important in other cases too. For instance, we might suppose that when Jesus shows his disciples his hands and his side, he is offering them a means by which they can recognise him: see Lk 24:39 and Jn 20:20. The first passage is particularly interesting for us, since it follows the road to Emmaus story. At the close of Matthew's Gospel, we are told that the disciples saw Jesus in Galilee, and that: 'When they saw him,

2. The road to Emmaus story

Chapter 24 of Luke's text records that on the first day of the week, that is, two days after the crucifixion, two of Jesus's disciples were making their way from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, a distance, so the Gospel tells us, of about 7 miles. The text continues:

While they were talking and discussing together ['about all these things that had happened'], Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognising him. And he said to them, 'What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?' And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?' And he said to them, 'What things?' And they said to him, 'Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people...' (Lk 24: 15-19)

The disciples go on to recount how 'some women of our company' had that morning found the tomb empty, and how this was then confirmed by others from their group. Jesus responds by expounding the scriptures to them, and by explaining, in the words of the evangelist, how it was 'necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory' (v. 26). The final episode in this brief story unfolds as follows:

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, 'Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and he vanished out of their sight. (Lk 24: 28-31)

And the evangelist records that at 'that same hour', Cleopas and his companion set off back to Jerusalem, where they learned that Jesus had also appeared to Simon Peter.

It would be possible to offer a reading of each of these stories that assigns no great theological weight to the theme of Jesus's unrecognisability. For instance, we might suppose that when Mary first sees Jesus in the garden, he is turned away from her, so that for this reason, she does not recognise him. Or in the case of the fishing story, we might suppose that when Jesus addresses his disciples from the shore, he is at

they worshipped him; but some doubted' (Mt 28: 17). The fact that some doubted may suggest, once more, that there was some difficulty in recognising the risen Christ.

some distance from them, and that it is for this reason that, at this point in the narrative, they fail to recognise him. And we might add that in each of these stories, if there is a problem of recognisability, it is surely rooted at least in part in the obvious fact that Mary and the disciples in Galilee think, indeed take themselves to know, that Jesus is dead, so for this reason, they are of course, to say no more, strongly predisposed to suppose that whoever it might be that is addressing them, it cannot be Jesus.

It might be harder to offer such a reading of the Emmaus story, since in this case, clearly, the disciples are in conversation with Jesus on the road for some considerable time, and yet do not recognise him. But Luke notes that 'their eyes were kept from recognising him' and adds that it is only when Jesus breaks the bread that 'their eyes were opened'. The use of the passive tense (the English translation tracks the Greek on this point) suggests that, here, Jesus's unrecognisability calls for some sort of theological rather than simply psychological or standard sense perceptual explanation: it is God who keeps the disciples from recognising Jesus. On this reading too, it might be argued, the theme of Jesus's initial unrecognisability is of no deep significance for an appreciation of the theological import of the story: on this reading, the theme is important, it might be said, simply as a condition of the unfolding of the narrative, since it makes good dramatic sense that Jesus should be unrecognised when explaining the scriptures to Cleopas and his companion, so that they can hear what he says, and be persuaded of its plausibility, before they understand that he has been raised: that way, when they are convinced of his resurrection, rather than seeing this as a freak event of some sort, they can find it intelligible in scriptural terms.³

For the purposes of this paper, I am going to suppose that these various ways of downplaying the idea that any deep theological significance attaches to Jesus's unrecognisability are mistaken. Rather, I shall proceed on the assumption that these texts invite, even if they do not strictly require, a reading that takes the initial unrecognisability of Jesus in his resurrected state to be theologically important. As I have suggested, the recurrence of the theme of unrecognisability across these different narrative traditions give us some reason to suppose that this is an integral feature of the early reports of the resurrection, and not simply, say, an accidental by-product of physical context, such as Jesus being located at some distance from, or being turned away from, his interlocutors.⁴

³ Compare Jean-Luc Marion's reading of the Emmaus story, according to which what the disciples gain in the course of their encounter with Jesus is not some new 'intuition' but the 'concepts' that are required to make sense of the intuition they have already received: "'They Recognized Him; And He Became Invisible to Them'", *Modern Theology*, 18 (2), 2002, pp. 145-52.

⁴ With regard to the Emmaus story, it is worth noting Mk 16: 12-13, which reads: 'After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but

Of course, it is possible to bring a further kind of scepticism to these stories. The scepticism I have mentioned so far, concerning the theological significance of Jesus's unrecognisability, takes the narratives at face value, as broadly reliable records of the historical data. But it would also be possible to doubt whether the stories are to be assigned in this way a historical significance.⁵ Without further discussion, for present purposes, I shall simply assume that we are not obliged to deny, or to affirm, the stories' historicity, in relevant respects.⁶

Granted this starting point, I am going to take two routes into the question of how we are to understand the disciples' eventual recognition of Jesus in the Emmaus story.

3. A first reading of the road to Emmaus story: the role of bodily demeanour

Here then is a first consideration. In general, religious traditions seem to suppose that participating fully in the relevant tradition requires not simply, if at all, right belief, and right desire, and in turn right moral conduct, but also, in relevant circumstances, what we might call right bodily comportment. Of course, right moral conduct will standardly involve in one sense of the expression right bodily comportment: if someone needs a drink of water and I, and only I, am in a position to provide it, then, supposing there are no complicating factors, I will be morally required to move my body in whatever ways are necessary to secure that outcome. But religious traditions commonly seem to take another kind of interest in the way in which a person is present in bodily terms to other human beings, and the material order more generally, and for present purposes, let us reserve the expression 'bodily comportment' or 'bodily demeanour' for this further case. For an illustration of bodily demeanour understood in this somewhat specialised sense, we could perhaps

they did not believe them.' This text seems to be an allusion to the same sequence of events that is reported in Luke's account, albeit that those events are recorded very briefly here. Significantly, this text places considerable weight on the fact that on this occasion, Jesus appeared 'in a different form', indicating that there was in the early church a tradition of reading the encounter in this way. Of course, the dating of the last chapter of Mark is contentious, but we can set aside that question for present purposes.

⁵ For an exploration of the relationship between the theme of Jesus's unrecognisability and Greco-Roman traditions concerning the unrecognisability of gods and heroes, see Max Whitaker, *Is Jesus Athene or Odysseus? Investigating the Unrecognisability and Metamorphosis of Jesus in his Post-Resurrection Appearances* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019). For a narrative-critical treatment of relevant New Testament texts, noting the evangelists' different purposes when treating this theme, see J. David Woodington's *Disbelieving Disciples: Doubt in the Post-Resurrection Scenes of the Four Gospels* (University of Notre Dame dissertation, 2018).

⁶ Dale Allison has recently remarked of the Emmaus story that 'I have been unable to come to any decision about the age and origin of the story': *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), p. 68. This assessment will serve for our purposes.

turn to Aristotle's discussion of the 'great souled' or magnanimous or proud person. Aristotle famously writes that:

a slow step is thought proper to the proud man, a deep voice, and a level utterance.⁷

Here, Aristotle describes the mode of bodily presence that he takes to be distinctive of the person who exhibits a certain kind of virtue, the virtue that in English translation is commonly named, following Aristotle's Greek expression, 'magnanimity' or 'great souledness'. On Aristotle's understanding of the matter, I take it, this way of being present to the world in bodily terms is not commendable for the reason that it is apt to bring about good outcomes, that is, because of its causal impact in some relevant respect. So this is a different case from the one where I need to move my body in a certain way if I am to extend a cup of water to the thirsty person. In that case, our interest in the body is purely instrumental: all that matters is that the body's disposition should be such as to secure the requisite, morally desirable outcome. By contrast, the slowness of step of the great-souled person, and the depth of his voice, are not evidently causal means to the production of desirable outcomes. Rather, as Aristotle explains the point, this distinctive bodily demeanour befits the proud person for the reason that 'the man who takes few things seriously is not likely to be hurried, nor the man who thinks nothing great to be excited, while a shrill voice and a rapid gait are the results of hurry and excitement'. Here, then, a person's evaluative stance – their consciousness, we might say, of their superior accomplishments, and of their self-sufficiency in their dealings with others – shines through their mode of bodily presence in the world. This demeanour counts as appropriate, therefore, not because of its tendency to bring about, causally, good outcomes, but in so far as hereby the magnanimous person's self-understanding, or sense of their status in the world, is made manifest.

The great-souled person's sense of their standing in the world is defined primarily, of course, by their relations to other human beings, and their conviction of their rightly elevated social status, and we might wonder about the case where a person's sense of themselves is defined by their religious convictions, and whether those convictions too can shine through a certain way of being present to other human beings in bodily terms. I take it that Pierre Bourdieu has some such possibility in mind when he speaks of how a certain conception not just of our social but our cosmological context can be, as he says, 'inscribed' in the body, so that the body's demeanour serves to express this more broadly defined understanding of what it is for a human life to be lived well. He writes:

⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Section III, tr. W.D. Ross:
<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.4.iv.html>, accessed 21 September 2022.

One could endlessly enumerate the values given body, made body, by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy which can instil a whole cosmology, through injunctions as insignificant as 'sit up straight' or 'don't hold your knife in your left hand', and inscribe the most fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of a culture in seemingly innocuous details of bearing or physical and verbal manners, so putting them beyond the reach of consciousness and explicit statement.⁸

A more directly theological example of this phenomenon is proposed by C.S. Lewis when he writes of the 'new humanity' of certain spiritually mature Christians of his acquaintance, suggesting that:

Their very voices and faces are different from ours; stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant.⁹

We may be uncertain about the details of Lewis's depiction of the mode of bodily presence that he takes to be appropriate to deep-seated Christian conviction. But in general terms, he is surely right to suppose that if a person holds to a Christian, or cognate, conception of their standing in the world – for instance, if they take themselves to be the object of an unswerving divine love – then that conception ought to find expression, one way or another, on at least some occasions, in their mode of bodily presence to other human beings and the material order in general. We may doubt whether we can specify at all precisely what form this bodily presence should in general take – certainly, giving such an account will not be quite so straightforward as it is on Aristotle's reading of the case of the great-souled person, where we can indicate with some precision the gait, pitch of voice, and so on of the person who has the relevant self-understanding, and exhibits the relevant virtue. But if a person does subscribe to a Christian or similar worldview, according to which they are held securely in the divine love, and does this not just as a matter of notional or merely creedal assent, but in a way that infuses their everyday sense of the deep significance of their life, then under relevant, spiritually favourable, circumstances, they surely will greet the world in something like the spirit of quiet radiance that Lewis describes here.

I take it that this truth is connected to another that is important for the transmission of religious traditions: a person may command religious or spiritual authority because of what they say (for instance, because of their capacity to formulate the teachings of the relevant tradition with a certain clarity and persuasive power), or again, they may command such authority because of their morally exemplary life, but in addition, in many cases anyway, we expect a figure of religious or spiritual

⁸ *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), p. 69.

⁹ *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: William Collins, Sons & Co., 1944), p. 186.

authority to be distinguished by virtue of their style of bodily presence. The person of spiritual authority is someone whose convictions run – should run – deep in the sense we have just discussed, so that those convictions, under relevant circumstances, shine through their bodily demeanour in their relations to other human beings and the world. Of course, there can be counterfeit examples of the kind of charismatic authority that is rooted in a person's style of bodily presence, and we may include here, in principle, cases where a person exhibits, or at least seems to exhibit, the quiet radiance to which Lewis alludes, but where they are, even so, unreliable as a source of spiritual counsel or example. Nonetheless, in standard cases, a certain style of bodily presence is, I take it, not just loosely associated with sanctity or spiritual authority, but revelatory of it, by virtue of being one of its constituents.¹⁰

We seem to have wandered some distance from our earlier discussion of the difficulties that may be involved in coming to recognise the risen Christ. And in truth, it may be hard to connect, interestingly, that discussion and these reflections on the role of bodily demeanour in the spiritual life. But these comments on the relationship between bodily comportment and sanctity, or spiritual authority, open up, I shall now propose, a conceptual space that may, perhaps, be of some relevance for an understanding of the feature of the resurrection stories with which we began – namely, the fact that Jesus's disciples, who knew him well before his death, appear to struggle to identify him when encountering him in his resurrected state.

4. The physical appearance and bodily demeanour of the risen Christ

A very simple account of this difficulty in identifying the risen Christ would begin with the thought that, in at least some of the resurrection encounters, Jesus's physical appearance has, in some important respects, changed, so that he no longer looks quite as he did before the crucifixion. There is perhaps some basis for this view in the Pauline idea that relative to the ante-mortem body, the resurrected body, while still a body, has a distinctive character and, we may surmise, a distinctive appearance. Putting the point by comparing the death of the body with the planting of a seed, Paul writes:

When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. (1 Cor 15: 37-8)

On this account, it seems that we should expect the resurrection body to be in some important respects quite different from the ante-mortem body, just as a plant is in

¹⁰ Compare the idea that Jesus taught 'as one who had authority': Mt 7:29 and Mk 1:22.

physical terms fundamentally different from the seed from which it has grown. And given that the plant and seed, because very different in structure, are also very different in appearance, it seems that, similarly, we should expect the resurrection body to be significantly different in appearance from the ante-mortem body.¹¹

For our purposes, it is significant that Paul's understanding of the character of the resurrection body, as reported here and in similar passages, presumably derives, in large measure, from the reports he had received from Peter and others of their encounters with the risen Christ – and of course Paul himself claimed to have had such an encounter, and that experience would also have informed, it seems reasonable to suppose, his remarks on the appearance, in the general case, of the resurrection body.¹² So given Paul's comments on the distinctive character of the resurrection body in his letter to the Corinthians, we have some reason to bring to our reading of the stories of Jesus's resurrection in the Gospels the background understanding that his resurrected body was, quite likely, strikingly different in appearance from his ante-mortem body, while still being recognisably, presumably, a human body.

If we allow that Jesus's resurrected body did, in certain important respects, take on a different appearance, it is natural to ask: how then were the disciples able to identify him when they encountered him in resurrected form? One answer would run as follows – and here we come, at last, to the point of our discussion of the role of bodily demeanour in the spiritual life. When we identify another human being as Mary or John and so on, we standardly rely, of course, on the distinctive appearance of certain of their bodily features. Even if we cannot record these differentiating characteristics with any precision in verbal terms, we know that our friend John has, say, a certain jawline, a certain set of the mouth, and so on – one that sets him apart from everyone else that we know. Moreover, in the normal case, we suppose that other humans can in principle be distinguished (even if we do not in fact, in the normal case, so distinguish them) not only by reference to the sort of differentiating feature that would, standardly, show up very readily in a photograph – such as a certain jawline – but also by reference to features which only reveal themselves in our interaction with them over an interval of time, because they have to do with what we have been calling the person's demeanour, that is, with the disposition of the body over time, especially in the case where, to return to the phenomenon that

¹¹ Paul's further comments in 1 Cor 15: 39-44 on the differing kinds of 'glory' of different bodies are also very much relevant here. It may be worth recalling that on the road to Emmaus, Jesus explains how it was 'necessary that the Christ should ... enter into his glory' (v. 26).

¹² Paul alludes to his own experience in 1 Cor 15: 8. Given our theme, it is perhaps worth noting that in the account of his encounter with Jesus that is presented in Acts, Paul asks: 'Who are you, Lord?' (9: 5). Moreover, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes that Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body' (3:21), and it seems reasonable to suppose that this observation also reflects his own experience of the risen Christ.

is of particular interest for us, the individual's personality, or their core values, or what we might term a certain 'quality of soul' (using this expression without any deep metaphysical commitment) infuse the movements of their body.

It would be wrong to draw too sharp a distinction here: no doubt, quality of soul, in this sense, can also show up in a photograph, or still more obviously, of course, in a portrait. But it is, I take it, above all in the movement of the body, that is, in the body as 'animated' – or 'soul infused' – that this aspect of the person is most powerfully revealed. To mark this distinction, let's distinguish between what we might call the 'purely physical' features of the body, meaning by this expression features of the body that can be captured straightforwardly without loss in a photograph, and the body's demeanour, that is, the characteristic disposition of the body over time, especially in so far as it serves to reveal someone's personality, or their sense of themselves or their core values.

Drawing on this distinction, we can say that while, standardly, we identify someone we know well by reference simply to their purely physical features, it is also possible in principle to identify such a person, or at least to be aided in identifying them, by reference to their particular style of bodily comportment. And for our purposes, it is notable that these two ways of identifying someone can in principle come apart. For instance, we may find that a person we know well has changed radically with respect to their purely physical features, and with respect therefore to their appearance in purely physical terms, while they have nonetheless retained, in at least some important respects, their distinctive style of bodily comportment. This can happen, of course, when we meet a person we have not seen for many years, perhaps for some decades. In such a case, we can find it difficult to recognise them simply by reference to their purely physical features, but even so, we may find that the person's style of bodily presence has persisted, and that we are able to identify them, even if only with some difficulty, on this basis – while also relying, perhaps, on those of their purely physical features that have in some significant measure remained the same.¹³ And this state of affairs need be no cause for surprise, to the extent that a person's style of bodily presence flows from what we have been calling their quality of soul, or as we might say the core of their personality – and their personality, in this sense, may well be longer lasting than certain of their bodily features considered in purely physical terms.

This distinction, between the appearance of a person with respect to their purely physical features and with respect to bodily demeanour, creates the conceptual space for us to suppose that while the resurrected Christ may have taken on a very

¹³ It has been put to me that a person with prosopagnosia will standardly identify people in this way. Of course, this form of identification is relatively difficult, certainly for those of us who are not accustomed to relying on it.

different appearance with respect to his purely physical features, his particular style of bodily presence may nonetheless, in some significant degree, have persisted. And in turn, we can allow in principle, therefore, that while it may have been difficult for the disciples to identify Christ in his resurrected state in the conventional way, that is, straight away by reference simply to his purely physical features, they may still have been able to recognise him in time, by reference to his particular style of being present to them in bodily terms. On this account, it is at least in part by virtue of his mode of bodily comportment that Jesus comes to be recognised by Cleopas and his companion at Emmaus, or by Mary in the garden, or by the disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

So far, I have suggested, at least implicitly, that this rendering of the idea that the risen Christ was initially hard to recognise has several merits. It fits with the idea, arguably present in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, that we should expect the resurrected Christ to have been significantly different in appearance with respect to his purely physical characteristics. It also coheres with the idea that bodily comportment is an important constituent of sanctity or spiritual authority – from which it follows that we should expect Jesus's bodily demeanour, in the course of his antemortem life, to have been at least somewhat distinctive, even if those who knew him well did not standardly identify him by reference to this demeanour. So in brief, we have here the beginnings of a case for the idea that in his resurrected state, Christ had a very different physical appearance, so that he was to that extent difficult to recognise, coupled with the idea that in coming to recognise him the disciples may have been aided by the fact that, in this state, he retained a certain style of bodily presence in his relations to other human beings. Lastly, this account also fits with the desideratum, which I laid down at the beginning of the paper, of taking the initial unrecognisability of the resurrected Christ to be in some way theologically significant. Why? Because on this view, to identify the resurrected Christ, it is not enough to observe simply his purely physical features; rather, the disciples need, in addition, to attend to what we have been calling his 'quality of soul', or his spiritual authority, as that is disclosed in his distinctive mode of bodily presence. To this extent, then, recognising the risen Christ is not a matter of, as it were, mere vision or mere hearing, of the kind that can obtain independently of the moral or spiritual condition of the subject of the experience, but instead calls for a kind of spiritually infused perception, which is sensitive to Christ's identity in spiritual and not only in bodily terms.¹⁴

¹⁴ In this respect, this account complements Sarah Coakley's discussion of Mary Magdalen's recognition of Jesus in the garden, which she considers a case of spiritually informed perception. See her essay 'The Resurrection and the "Spiritual Senses": On Wittgenstein, Epistemology and the Risen Christ', in her collection *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 130-52.

5. A reading of the Emmaus text in terms of the idea of bodily demeanour

Turning to the Emmaus text, it is notable that on their return to Jerusalem, the disciples describe their encounter with the risen Christ by saying that he was 'recognised by them when he broke the bread' (Lk 24:35). So on their own account of the matter, it seems that Christ was made known to them by virtue of performing a certain bodily action – and it is at least implied, we might infer, that he was, therefore, not recognised simply by reference to his purely physical properties. After all, had he been recognised simply by reference to his purely physical properties, following the normal pattern of our identification of other human beings, then it is hard to see how he could also have been 'made known' in the breaking of the bread: in that case, his identity would already have been settled by reference to those properties. So at this juncture, the Emmaus story seems to invite the thought that in recognising the risen Christ, the disciples were required to do more than note the continuity between his purely physical features, at the point at which he broke the bread, and the appearance he was known to have had ante-mortem.

Of course, Luke's text does not directly say that the disciples were able to recognise Jesus by virtue of the particular mode of his bodily presence to them. And it might be supposed that what in fact enables their identification of this figure as Jesus is his recapitulation of Jesus's actions at the Last Supper – when taking, breaking and giving the bread. Nonetheless, we can still find a role for our first set of considerations in reading the text at this point. After all, it is clear that the text represents something that Jesus did, rather than simply his physical appearance, as the key to the disciples' capacity to recognise him, and this is exactly what we should expect if his demeanour was in some way important for their identification of him. Moreover, we know that, in general, ritual actions – contrast an action such as returning the milk to the fridge – can be infused with existential depth, and that partly for this reason, it is possible for a person's character to shine through such actions. Moreover, such actions can also be performed in ways that are in some measure distinctive to the individual, and when so performed, they are thereby capable of disclosing, to that extent, a person's individual 'quality of soul'.

So there is, I suggest, some conceptual space to say that, perhaps, Cleopas and his companion were able to identify the risen Christ at least in part because of the inflexions of his body, that is, at least in part on account of the particular style of bodily presence that he brought to his taking, breaking and giving of the bread. On this reading, it is because of his demeanour that the disciples were able to recognise the figure who broke the bread as Jesus – rather than simply a figure who was doing what Jesus had done. Moreover, this reading has some claim to be theologically

more fruitful than one that takes the disciples to recognise Jesus simply on the basis of his recapitulation of Jesus's actions at the Last Supper, since that reading suggests, once again, that the identification of the risen Christ can be achieved independently of any appreciation of who he is in spiritual terms.

6. A second reading of the Emmaus story: identifying the body of Christ

I want to turn now to a further cluster of considerations that may perhaps be relevant to our reading of the Emmaus story, and which we can set alongside this first line of reflection regarding the distinction between the appearance of the body with respect to its purely physical features and with respect to demeanour.

We have been considering the question of what it takes to recognise the risen Christ in bodily terms. And if read from the vantage point of Christian theology broadly conceived, it is striking that the Emmaus story presents us with an episode in which the expression 'the body of Christ' seems to have three referents.¹⁵ In the scene where Cleopas and his fellow disciple recognise Jesus, the expression 'the body of Christ' can of course be taken, very straightforwardly, to pick out the body of the one who breaks the bread: here, the expression refers to the body of the resurrected Christ. Moreover, given Jesus's actions at the Last Supper, as reported in Luke and the other synoptic gospels, when Jesus takes the bread, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples, and then says of it, immediately after performing these actions, 'this is my body' (Lk 22:19), it is hard to avoid the conclusion that at this same point in the Emmaus story, the bread itself – which once again, Jesus takes and breaks and gives to his disciples – is also to be understood to be, in some relevant sense, the body of Christ.

Lastly, on the conventional Christian account of the matter, we may also speak, of course, of the Christian community, of the church, as the body of Christ. And Paul grounds this belief in the thought that through their participation in the eucharistic meal, Christians share in the one bread. As he puts the point:

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor 10:17)¹⁶

¹⁵ I take it that this is the only text in the New Testament of which this can be said, though, arguably, we might offer a similar reading of the passage in John 21 where Jesus appears to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee. The theological point of the idea that the community of Jesus's followers constitutes the body of Christ is, presumably, at least in part, to explain where Christ is to be located, once he is no longer present in his localised, ante-mortem form – and for this reason, it seems we should not speak of the disciples at the Last Supper as the body of Christ.

¹⁶ For the idea that this body is Christ's body, see this text: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.' (1 Cor 12: 12).

Given this background, any Christian reader of the Emmaus text evidently has good reason to suppose that at the point in this story when Jesus breaks the bread, the expression ‘the body of Christ’ can be taken to refer not only to the body of the one who breaks the bread, and to the bread itself, but also to the two disciples, who in receiving the bread, which as the text says Jesus ‘gives’ to them, are thereby constituted as the incipient church.

This scene from the Emmaus story, where the expression ‘the body of Christ’ has these three referents, throws very clearly into relief the idea that following the resurrection, the body of Christ has taken on a new, corporate character – and invites us to suppose that this change is made possible, above all, by virtue of the fact that through their encounter with the risen Christ in the bread and wine of the eucharistic meal, Christians are constituted as a new community, one that is in some sense animated by a single, corporate life. (This idea is also evident, I take it, in the passage from Paul that I cited just now.) Drawing out this line of interpretation, we might add that the fact that the resurrected Christ disappears at the close of this scene, at the point at which Jesus has been recognised in the breaking of the bread, perhaps invites us to think that because Christ’s body has now taken on a new, corporate character, by virtue of the fact that Christians can participate in the eucharist, there is no longer any need for it to be present in the form of an individual body.

There are many matters we might ponder here, but let us keep our focus on the question of how it is that Cleopas and his companion succeed in recognising that the individual before them is indeed the resurrected Jesus. We might approach this question by asking: in general, what is it that marks out a body as the body of Christ? Or relatedly: is there a common core of meaning that extends across the various contexts in which we can speak of the ‘body of Christ’? To make some progress with this question, let’s take what is perhaps the simplest case, where the expression picks out the body of the historical Jesus.

Christians are of course committed to thinking of the historical Jesus as the divine Word, the Logos, as incarnate – and on the standard Christian reading of the matter, that claim entails that through his life, death and resurrection, this individual reveals and also realises the divine purposes in creation, not imperfectly or in part, but definitively.¹⁷ Accordingly, if we are operating on these assumptions, then we know that the body of the historical Jesus must play its proper part in revealing and realising the divine purposes in creation. Given our earlier discussion, we should therefore say that the historical Jesus’s demeanour, or style of bodily presence,

¹⁷ For further discussion, see my paper ‘Storied Identity: Reading the Bible Eucharistically’, in E. Stump and J. Wolfe, eds, *Philosophy, Theology and Biblical Exegesis*, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 2021, Vol. 13 (4), pp. 45-64.

must, to the greatest extent possible for a being of our mode of embodiment, reveal and effect the divine purposes in creation – from which it follows that the divine purposes in creation should shine through the historical Jesus's way of being present in bodily terms to other human beings and the material order in general.

Given this understanding of what it is that marks out the body of the historical Jesus as the body of the incarnate Logos, we can raise a question about whether the Christian community can, in some significant degree, play this same sort of role, and in turn a question about whether the eucharistic bread and wine can do so. I take it that the answer to these questions is in each case 'yes', so that there is a reason to affirm that the Christian community, and the eucharistic elements, are, in some relevant sense, the body of Christ. But rather than pursue those matters, let us keep our focus on the question that is of primary interest for our present enquiry, namely, how the disciples in the Emmaus story come to recognise the figure who breaks the bread as Jesus.

The Christian reader of Luke's Gospel will of course see the act of breaking the bread in this scene as a reference back to the Last Supper, a communal meal which in turn looks back to the Passover, as well as forwards to Christ's passion; and they will also see the Last Supper, and in turn the breaking of the bread in the Emmaus story, as an allusion to the eschatological future, represented imaginatively as a heavenly banquet.¹⁸ If this background can be taken for granted, then we can say somewhat straightforwardly that in performing this action, of breaking and giving bread, the 'stranger' who joined Cleopas and his companion on the road thereby displays the entire sweep of God's action in creation and redemption, since the narrative that encompasses the Passover, the Last Supper, Christ's atoning death, and the eschatological future, conceived in Christian terms, picks out the central features of that action, and is only fully intelligible to someone who understands the entire story of creation and redemption. This is one basis for thinking of the individual who performs these actions in the Emmaus story as having, at least, a Christ-like status. Here it matters perhaps that on the road, as the story tells us, Christ has explained to the disciples the significance of the scriptures – so that in this scene, they can understand how, exactly, these gestures serve to reveal the sweep of the divine action, both in the past and into the eschatological future.

Moreover, while the text does not say as much, a Christian is presumably at liberty to see this scene, in which Christ is recognised, as a kind of vindication of his words at the Last Supper when he said of the bread 'this is my body' and instructed his disciples to perform this same action in remembrance of him. Why? Because in so acting, Christ was promising his disciples that he would be with them, following his

¹⁸ These ideas are all commonplaces of the Christian tradition, and given space, it would not be difficult to ground them in scriptural terms.

death, in the bread – and also the wine – which he has identified as his body. And here in this scene from the Emmaus story, the reader sees that Christ is indeed present to the disciples following his death, by virtue of being present in his resurrected body. And according to the story, the risen Christ is not content to be present simply in his resurrected state: instead, he chooses to repeat Jesus's actions from the Last Supper, by breaking the bread and giving it to the disciples. And thereby he indicates, we might suppose, now from the vantage point of his resurrected state, that this gesture, of breaking bread, is indeed the one in which he is definitively made present following the crucifixion. Accordingly, we can say that when the resurrected Christ breaks the bread, he validates the eucharist as the mode of his enduring presence in the Christian community, and thereby, we could say, he establishes the church, as the community that is constituted in the eucharistic rite. If all of this is so, then we can see why, in this scene, there is some reason to take the expression 'the body of Christ' to refer not only to the bread, but also to the body of the one who breaks the bread. Why? Because on this reading, in breaking the bread and giving it to the disciples, this figure both reveals the divine purposes and also realises those purposes, in a very fundamental way, by establishing the eucharist as the mode of Christ's enduring presence in the Christian community.

In sum, on this reading, we can see how it is indeed in the breaking of the bread that Christ is recognised. As with our first interpretation, this reading of the Emmaus story invites us to assign a deep theological significance to the inability of the disciples to recognise Christ simply on the basis of his purely physical features – or indeed simply on account of his recapitulation of Jesus's actions from the Last Supper. We could perhaps put the point by saying that on this second reading, Jesus's identity is only disclosed to the person who sees the divine purposes as disclosed and realised definitively in these actions, where that insight involves a measure of trust, and perhaps the exercise of the spiritual imagination, rather than being simply a matter of bodily seeing or of some compelling inference. It is worth adding that this approach to the text can be combined with the first, if we wish, by supposing that the two accounts provide mutually supporting considerations that together show how the disciples had good, spiritually freighted, reasons for identifying the figure of the individual who breaks the bread as Jesus.

To conclude, several of the resurrection stories in the New Testament pose a question about why the disciples should, apparently, only recognise Jesus with a measure of difficulty, and not on account simply of his purely physical features. In this discussion, we have been exploring two ways of trying to understand this element of these stories, with particular reference to the road to Emmaus story. First, we have explored the idea that a person's bodily comportment, and not only their purely physical features, can be important for their identification over time, at

least in principle, even if we do not standardly so identify people. And secondly, we have noted how in the Emmaus story, the expression the 'body of Christ' has, plausibly, three referents – and how the disciples would have had reason to think of the body of the one they had considered a stranger, as they walked along the road, as the body of Christ, since on this reading of his identity, in his actions of taking and breaking and giving bread, this individual can be taken to reveal and also in a very fundamental respect to give effect to the divine purposes in creation, specifically by confirming the validity of the eucharist, and thereby constituting the Christian community as the body of Christ. Each of these readings offers a way of expounding what seems to be a fundamental proposal of the Emmaus text: that the risen Jesus is made known not by virtue simply of his bodily appearance, but in what he does, and we might add, in how he does it.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am grateful to friends and colleagues for helpful discussion of the ideas developed in this paper, notably the members of the Tantur group, convened by Eleonore Stump and Judith Wolfe, and in addition Max Baker-Hytch, John Barton, Markus Bockmuehl, Ed Chan-Stroud, Sarah Coakley, John Cottingham, Philip Goff, Isidoros Katsos, Dave Leal, Tim Mawson, Marcel Sarot, and Richard Swinburne, among others. I regret that because of pressures of space, I have not been able to act on all of the many constructive suggestions I have received.