

“We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel”

In Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*, a London lawyer appears at the home of a country blacksmith named Joe Gargery, brother-in-law of the boy Philip “Pip” Pirrip. “My name is Jaggers,” says the lawyer. “I am the bearer of an offer to relieve you of this young fellow your apprentice . . . I am instructed to communicate to him that he will come into a handsome property, that he be immediately removed from his present sphere of life . . . and be brought up as a gentleman . . . a young fellow of great expectations.”

Great expectations! Pip could only conclude that a Miss Havisham must be his benefactor – a wealthy, elderly recluse whom he occasionally wheeled around her estate. And with this in mind off he goes to London to be dressed and taught and to bear himself as a well-supported and arrogant urban fellow.

Except that even as he is later enjoying his adult status and dressing the part and fast becoming a snob he is visited by his actual benefactor, a now wealthy ex-convict from Australia who, during a failed escape from a prison ship, remembered a kindness done to him by Pip and secretly paid his way to becoming a gentleman.

Unfortunately this ex-convict benefactor, by returning to England, broke the law, had his wealth confiscated and died in prison – leaving Pip destitute – but a humbler, more compassionate human being; much less the “gentleman” that he had expected to be, yet so much more a human being.

So what were the expectations of Cleopas and his friend in today's Gospel? Not much different from those of the twelve original apostles of Jesus. The expectations of all – right up to the trial – were of a restoration of Israel's royal past – under a new David. In other words they were interested in history, as we normally know it – a succession of empires, political, commercial, conflictual as in Armageddon. Despite his curiosity, the stranger who approaches them knows this and has to respond:

“How slow of heart, how exasperating you are not to have seen that the Gospel is about changing the kind of history you expect, about breaking through the superficial and violent everydayness of the news we call “history” to release a deeper sense of history that has to do with mutual graciousness and the peace that can come of it, with our becoming shepherds of nature, caretakers of each other, sharing the most radical of surnames: that we, each and everyone of us: ARE. That fundamentally related!

This stranger must have had a profound effect on the two disciples, for when he broke bread with them something else broke as well – their hearts; they caught the taste of what a history of gracious being can be: sharing a table, as simple as that. “Stay with us” they said. And so say we.

And as a postscript to this message, introduce a little passivity or openness into your expectations over time. Because while you are focused often intently on some desirable or specific outcome ahead, you may end up surprised – as Columbus should have been.

Geoff Wood