

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Gospel: Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "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.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

REFLECTION 1:

ABIDE WITH US

Guy Sajer's gripping biography, 'The Forgotten Soldier' tells of his harrowing four years as a German soldier on the Russian front during World War 2. At the end of his long ordeal he relates how battered, dishevelled and exhausted he made his way to the family home in Alsace Lorraine. Close to the house where he had lived he passed a bent and elderly woman. It was his mother, and both mother and son failed to recognise each other - memories dimmed by long absence, faces and bodies unexpectedly changed by suffering.

This theme of delayed recognition runs strongly through all the resurrection stories. Like many of us, the disciple had fixed ideas of what God is like and how things should work out for us. The disappointment and disillusionment of Jesus' disciples are expressed by telling him their sad story on the road to Emmaus: 'Our own hope had been that he would have been the one to set Israel free' (Luke 24: 13-35). It should have been as we imagined and yet it wasn't. God should have behaved according to our blueprint, but he didn't. We thought that being saved would look like this, but it didn't.

Jesus doesn't begin immediately to answer the disciples' questions, but he takes a roundabout way, through word and sign. He draws them through the word of God to an understanding of his ways. Jesus appears in the most everyday of signs – bread at the supper table signifies his presence. Jesus at the inn at Emmaus, still the unrecognised guest takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and shares it with them. Notice how Luke intends his readers to understand that the invitation to 'stay' opens the heart of the believer to further truth. 'Stay with us' also draws attention to the sacrament of the Eucharist, the means by which the Lord did and does stay with us. In the darkness of persecution that threatened the Luken church in the 80s, the Emmaus episode offered the encouragement needed to persevere in a life of faith nourished and strengthened by the Eucharist. Only at this point in their encounter are the disciples' eyes opened and they recognise their visitor as the Lord. The 'opened eyes' phrase in the scriptures always referred to a deepened understanding of our faith. The fact is that Jesus pointed to the means by which all the followers of the Lord would encounter him. In the breaking of the bread and in the sharing of the word, the Lord would abide forever with us.

For us who have been born on this side of the resurrection event, the Emmaus story is a source of encouragement. Like the two on the road, in our journey through life we will be visited by unrecognised guests who will make known the truth to us.

REFLECTION 2: A SACRAMENTAL RENDEZVOUS

Two disciples in to-day's Gospel (Luke 24:13-35) encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus. Later they come to realise he is Jesus. The initial lack of recognition on the part of the travellers was a popular folk motif in both biblical and extra-biblical literature. Many families have stories of after-death appearances of their loved ones. The promise of new life is affirmed in our vigils and funerals. Apparitions of Mary in Lourdes, Fatima and after death appearances of many saints are further testament to the bridge between life and death. Just as we can sense the presence of a loved one through nature, a sunrise or a breath of wind, so too can Jesus be known on our own road to Emmaus and in the breaking of bread at the Eucharist.

Through the story of Cleopas and his companion making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus, Luke has assured every disciple of Jesus that he is present in the breaking of bread of the scriptures and in the sharing of the Eucharistic bread of his body. As the Gospel puts it 'He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread'. To be made known is to be experienced as present, not as a mere memory recalled from the distant past but as a living breathing reality. Present in the blessed, broken and shared bread – present also in the word as it is opened up and welcomed into hearts burning with recognition and welcome – these are sacramental in character.

In the ancient world, long before Christianity began, whenever people sensed the presence of a higher spiritual power in their lives – wherever the divine seemed to overlap with the human, they called that experience 'mystery'/'sacrament'. Through the sacrament, believers enter into the very life of Christ and know him as present with and within them. Just as the experience of the two disciples and the risen Christ at Emmaus could indeed be understood as sacramental. So, also are the many sacred coming togethers where believers gather to know Christ in the breaking of bread (the Mass). At every sacramental rendezvous (meeting together at a specified time and place), Jesus Christ presents himself to us, where the divine overlaps with the human and hearts begin to brim with grateful recognition and joyous praise.

By referring to the approach of evening, the Evangelist conjured up for his readers the powers of darkness, doom, alienation and evil dispelled by Jesus, Saviour and light of the world. For us to have been born on this side of the resurrection event, the Emmaus story is a source of encouragement. Like the two on the road, in our journeys through life we will be visited by unrecognised guests who will make known the truth to us. Like the two on the road, we will be able to meet the Lord in the breaking of the bread of his body and his word.