

Third Sunday of Easter, 26 April 2020



Duccio di Buoninsegna (1255-1319): *Arrival at Emmaus*, detail (c1308): Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena

Gospel: *St Luke 24.13-35*

Now on that same day [the day of his resurrection] 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.

Homily

‘We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.’ (*Lk 24.21*)

Today’s Gospel reading (which I hope you have just read), the famous episode of the disciples of Emmaus, never ceases to astonish and move us. That is no less true at this moment than at other times, because it enables us, when half the world is in lockdown, on our life as a whole and the new life that Christ offers us. It reminds us that the resurrection reveals how indestructible is the essential love that has been at work all through the story of Jesus. It uncovers the reality of *who* and *what* Jesus is, how he *enters* our lives, and how we *encounter* him; *what* he teaches us, and *how* he teaches it. But it also reveals much about us: about our direction of travel in life, and our conversion; about our journey from despondency to hope – from life as a burden to living by faith in communion with the Lord. Once we grasp, like the disciples, in the full light of the resurrection, *who it is* that this story is all about, then we see exactly what those Emmaus disciples on the road saw – that the suffering and the death of Christ were indeed *essential*, and his story and ours belong together. And when we know that, we, like them, want to turn to other disciples to share with them the life-transforming hope, joy and love in what we have discovered. As any pilgrim to the Holy Land knows, there are all sorts of theories as to where the biblical site of Emmaus is. That in itself seems to tell us that wherever and whenever we each discover Jesus, the road that leads to that discovery is a unique road that each Christian, each person, takes, with the unseen, unknown saviour as our travelling companion.

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The story begins in the past tense: ‘we had hoped’ they said to the stranger (*Lk 24.21*); we *had* followed him, we *had* believed. But their hopes had been deeply, shockingly, disappointed. Even Jesus, who had shown himself to be a powerful prophet, had apparently failed. It is not hard to see in the drama of this story a reflection of many Christians of our time: it seems that the light of faith has failed in the minds and hearts of many would-be disciples of Jesus. Negative experiences in our lives leave us feeling bereft, abandoned, exposed, and may be embittered. It is not difficult to feel disillusioned and betrayed by a Lord who was meant to change everything: ‘We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.’ Such a Jesus becomes for those who lose faith, as for those two disciples, a mere object of discussion or even argument but no longer the foundation of life, or hope, or joy. It is no accident that the two disciples are walking *away* from Jerusalem, *away* from the community of the other disciples.

When Jesus approaches them, St Luke tells us that they are engaged in a *dispute* (*syzeteîn*: 24.15; see also 22.23, Acts 6.9, 9.29), and Jesus asks (v.17) what are the ideas they are

literally ‘*hurling* at each other’ (*antiballein*). There is a current violence implied in St Luke’s choice of words. Perhaps the Emmaus disciples had fallen into a disagreement with one another, or with the disciples who they had left behind in Jerusalem, with whom until recently they had shared the company of Jesus.

But the illusive presence of Jesus makes it possible for such an attitude to mature, to change, and become one of discovery, reconciliation, and peace. It is possible for us to be drawn away from futile argument about all the disappointments and vulnerabilities of our lives into a dialogue with Jesus, into a dialogue with the Living One, to experience him as the word of life and the food of life. At *no point* in our lives is such a dialogue with Jesus impossible or unfruitful, even in the turmoil thrown up by a deadly pandemic. In our encounter with Christ faith becomes *deeper* and *more genuine* because it is refined in the fires of bitter experience; and it becomes *resilient* because it is nourished not by human thoughts but by the revelation of Jesus in our midst.

This is all food for our reflection as Christians, and as church communities, caught up in a global situation which we simply cannot escape: worried for the future, defensive about events we cannot control, and uncertain of a God whose ways seem as inscrutable as they are powerful.

Pope Francis’s recent analogy between the Church today and the disciples in the storm-tossed boat with Jesus (*Mk* 4.35–41) is a very good one.

The storm exposes our vulnerability, and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. ... The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people’s souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly ‘save’ us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots, and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

Like the Emmaus disciples then, ‘we had hoped’ that the Lord would save us from evil, from the sorrow, suffering, fear, and unprepared death which our adversity has brought. But we have not been spared; and while we journey through this crisis, deprived as we are of the Eucharist as food for our journey, it is essential for each one of us to be taught by Jesus, to *listen* daily to the word of God read in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and to *foster* our desire not only to receive the *sacrament* of the Lord’s Body, but also to desire to be united and reconciled with ‘the *fellowship* of his Body’. Very uncomfortably we’re not being let beyond that point at this moment.

‘If you want to be a pray-er’, Mother Mary Clare SLG used to say, ‘you must pray’. There is no getting round it: no shortcut. You can’t have faith or prayer or love second hand. You cannot have the peace, or any other gift that comes from above, *without* prayer. There is no avoiding staying with Jesus, who stayed with us and embraced our suffering. There is also no alternative to conversion: to assimilating his lifestyle to ours, to choosing his invitation

to live our lives in his 'eucharistic logic' of death-to-self as the path to communion with God and solidarity with others.

When we slowly emerge from our current pandemic, the Church (throughout the world) will have a real opportunity to highlight and address the spiritual questions of our age. But our ability to do so *then* depends entirely on our willingness to learn from Christ *now* – in our homes. So I want to encourage you be holy! Be reconciled to God, and to one another! Rediscover the grace of a transforming encounter with the Risen Lord. Let him be the centre of your lives. Build your life on him! In Jesus you will find the strength to open yourselves to others and to make yourselves, after his example, a gift for the whole world. Be confident because the risen Christ is walking with you, as he was yesterday, and will do for ever. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty Father, your risen Son appeared to his disheartened disciples on the Emmaus road. He explained them how the messiah had to suffer before entering his glory, and revealed himself in the broken bread. Open our eyes to his resurrection, so that today we may know him in all his redeeming work; through the same Jesus Christ, our risen saviour. Amen.