

GOSPEL

Luke 24:13-35

(They recognised him at the breaking of bread)

Two of the disciples of Jesus were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened. Now as they talked this over, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; but something prevented them from recognising him. He said to them, 'What matters are you discussing as you walk along?' They stopped short, their faces downcast.

Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered him, 'You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days.' 'What things?' he asked. 'All about Jesus of Nazareth' they answered 'who proved he was a great prophet by the things he said and did in the sight of God and of the whole people; and how our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death, and had him crucified. Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free. And this is not all: two whole days have gone by since it all happened; and some women from our group have astounded us: they went to the tomb in the early morning, and when they did not find the body, they came back to tell us they had seen a vision of angels who declared he was alive. Some of our friends went to the tomb and found everything exactly as the women had reported, but of him they saw nothing.'

Then he said to them, 'You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets! Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter into his glory?' Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.

When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on; but they pressed him to stay with them. 'It is nearly evening' they said 'and the day is almost over.' So he went in to stay with them. Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; but he had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?'

They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them, 'Yes, it is true. The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.' Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognised him at the breaking of bread.

HOMILY

The account of the Road to Emmaus is a masterpiece in short-story telling. St Luke doesn't waste a single word, providing a great sense of drama with rich use of detail: the point of departure, the intended destination, the distance from the city, the enigmatic appearance of Jesus, the dialogue, the gestures of hospitality. Emotions too are sketched with poignant subtlety: the stopping with faces downcast, the astonishment of the report from the women, the recollection of how the disciples' hearts 'burned within us...' And then there is just the whole change in pace and mood. At first it feels like a quiet, spiritual walk in the evening – albeit in sadness. But no sooner have they recognised Jesus than they are up and away in an instant, hastening back to Jerusalem with great joy and excitement.

To any Jewish convert to Christianity at that time, the layers of meaning to this story would have been apparent. The allusion to the Eucharist – the seeming end point of their encounter with Jesus – would have been most obvious. These are the same four verbs of the institution narratives in the Gospels and St Paul: Jesus 'took', 'blessed', 'broke' and 'handed it to them'. Added to the fact that it is the very first 'Dies Domini' - the Lord's Day - of Easter Sunday, the allusion to the Sunday worship of the Lord in the Scriptures and in the breaking of the bread is inescapable. And as such, the story becomes not just the summary of an encounter with the Risen Lord but a summary of the whole experience and obligation of the nascent Church: the experience of re-reading all the Scriptures in the light of the crucified and risen Christ who forever abides with them in the 'breaking of the bread'; and the obligation to preach this with joy to all the nations. This is precisely what we see happening in the Acts of the Apostles (also written by St Luke), which we read in our first readings at holy Mass throughout Eastertide.

However, the real key to interpreting this 'recognition story' is five simple words: 'and their eyes were opened' (three consecutive words in Greek). This exact phrase occurs in only one other place throughout the entirety of the bible and any believing Jew would have recognised it: Genesis 3:7. It is where Adam and Eve take the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil 'and their eyes were opened, and they recognised that they were naked'.

St Leo the Great encourages us to see in this Gospel scene a counter parallel to the fall of Adam and Eve. As we read the text in this light, so too our eyes are opened. These two disciples are heading down hill away from Jerusalem, away from the holy city where Jesus will appear to the disciples; they are leaving the Church behind in their distress and are therefore full of sorrow. They are symbolic of fallen humanity, of man wandering away from God towards the darkness of life without Him. But God never abandons his people. The whole history of salvation is about this truth; and Jesus comes to save, to bring them back. And just as Adam and Eve fell away from God by their grasping at the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so too God will now offer man new fruit, at his own invitation, from the new tree of life. For that is what the Eucharist is: the fruit of the tree of life, the cross. It's what St John intuited as he stood at the foot of the cross with Mary: 'and from his side flowed blood and water' (Jn 19:34). It is no mere coincidence, then, that St Peter refers to the cross as a tree at the very beginning of his preaching ministry (Acts 5:30).

Jesus is being presented to us here not just as risen from the dead but, once again, as the New Adam (cf. Lk 3:38; 4:1-13; 22:44; 23:43): the source of life and of new creation. He comes to restore fallen humanity to perfect communion with God but also to 'divinise' human nature. And he will do this by providing food that brings not death, like the 'fruit' of the tree of old, but the life of His own flesh and blood. "This meal at Emmaus is the first meal of the new creation" [cf., JUST, A., The Ongoing Feast].

This is why St Leo the Great aptly comments, "the eyes of these men were opened far more happily when the glorification of their own nature was revealed to them, than the eyes of those first parents of our race on whom the confusion of their own transgression was inflicted"[Sermon 73]. The eyes of Adam and Eve recognised that they were naked because they had abandoned God; the Church, through the eyes of these two disciples, recognises that God has not abandoned man but has redeemed human nature, which has been 're-clothed' with the glory of the Risen Christ.

What a marvel this 'recognition story' really is!

This Easter time, we are sadly being deprived of this encounter and recognition of the Risen Lord in our midst in the 'breaking of bread', in the Eucharist. But let us not be deceived, thereby, into thinking that it has somehow diminished in its significance. For it has not! This is precisely where he wanted us to recognise Him most of all; this is why the story of the road to Emmaus is so important. It is there to console us and remind us precisely where we are normally meant to meet him: with the Church gathered on the Lord's Day, going through the Scriptures and with the breaking of the bread.

So, if you feel at this time that your spiritual life is, like those disciples, going somewhat downhill and your soul feels downcast by your sins, remember that it was during just such a time that the Lord was accompanying those disciples all the while, even if they were unable to recognise Him. The same is surely true of us. Let us have faith that these fruits of the tree of life – God's mercy and His Real Presence – shall soon return to brighten up our souls once more and set us back on course to the heavenly Jerusalem.

As was said with characteristic eloquence by St Augustine, "Where did the Lord wish to be recognised? In the breaking of bread. ... It was for our sakes that he did not want to be recognised ... because we were not going to see him in the flesh, and yet we were going to eat his flesh. So, if you are a believer ... you may take comfort in the breaking of bread. The Lord's absence is not an absence. Have faith, and the one you cannot see is with you" [Sermon 235.3., cf., GADENZ, P., The Gospel of Luke].

POST SCRIPT

In St James', the light behind the high altar/tabernacle has been left on 24/7 since the lockdown. If you are ever passing by on your legitimate time of outdoor exercise, do come into the garden and say a prayer. You can see the tabernacle through the rear window of the church. His absence is still a Presence!