

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

WERE NOT OUR HEARTS BURNING WITHIN US WHILE HE WAS TALKING TO US
ON THE ROAD

Today's gospel is one of my favourites. It lends itself to being acted out and I have fond memories of doing just that with high school and university students. It is a significant gospel story in more than one way and I hope that I can do justice to it.

But first some context.

Over these past three Sundays beginning with Easter Sunday we have been reading of occasions of the disciples meeting the risen Lord. On Easter Sunday morning we read of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary going to the tomb and discovering the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. And suddenly the risen Jesus appeared to them and instructed the two Marys to tell the disciples (whom the risen Lord called his brothers) to go to Galilee where they would see him.

And last Sunday the Gospel reading from John 20: 19-31 provides the account of the risen Lord Jesus appearing to the disciples who were hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews and showing them his hands and his side. Thomas who was not with the disciples refused to believe, until a week later Jesus appeared again and said to Thomas put your finger here, reach out your hand put it in my side. At that moment Thomas doubt changed to worship "My Lord and my God".

Today's gospel is also situated on the first day of the week, the day of the Resurrection. It begins "now on that same day" Two of them, one of whom is named Cleopas, are walking towards Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking about all the things that had happened. No doubt they were speaking of Jesus's suffering and death only a couple of days before.

The risen Lord Jesus comes up beside them "but their eyes were kept from recognising him". Why could they not recognise Jesus? Was it because they could not possibly fathom that Jesus could have risen from the dead. MAYBE .

The Greek text of this text is rather precise about this non-recognition: It suggests that “their eyes were being held” a hint that this non-recognition of the risen Jesus was somehow due to the action of God. The two disciples’ recognition of the risen Lord must take place within a wider context, at a time of God’s choosing, according to God’s plan. And that is what happens in this encounter.

Jesus walks beside the two disciples and encourages them to tell the story as they understand it by playing ignorant. The two disciples are quite surprised and asks “are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days”? Jesus encourages them to continue sharing by asking “What things?”

I told you that I love this gospel reading. As a Social Worker with experience in counselling I like how Jesus asked an open question “What things?” He is encouraging these two disciples to share about how they see things. And it is with sadness that they do share. They had hoped that this Jesus, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, was the one to redeem Israel. They were exceedingly disappointed. Things had not turned out how they had expected. They were looking for a great leader who would liberate their people from the Romans.

All they know is what they have heard: that the tomb was empty. None of this made sense to the two disciples. They could not fathom that Jesus could be alive. They were lost in their grief.

So Jesus tells the story of salvation from the Jewish Scriptures and how it pertains to him. Jesus is reframing the story. But they still do not recognise him. Or rather they are prevented from recognising the risen Lord.

By this time it is almost evening and the disciples urge this stranger, the risen Jesus, to stay with them. And at table with them he “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” v 30. And at that moment their eyes are opened and they recognise him. He disappears from their sight.

Why the sudden disappearance? Well if we think back to the events of the Last Supper Jesus took the bread, and the cup, and asked them to eat and drink in remembrance of him.

The time between the Resurrection and the Ascension I understand as a gradual time of change. The stories of the risen Lord from recent Sundays reveal the disciples coming to grips with, or getting used to a new reality. The Lord, who was crucified is now risen from the dead. The wounds in his hands and side are a connecting point. They are evidence that he who was crucified is risen.

But the risen Lord will be only visible to them for a short period of time.

But back to today's gospel story. It is a reminder to the disciples that you will not see me, after the Ascension (you will not see me once the 40 days are finished) but you will remember me when you read about what the prophets had to say about the messiah, and in the breaking of the bread. Or to put it another way when you break bread I will be there with you.

I need to share one other point from today's gospel "were not our hearts burning within us as he was talking to us on the road". Eventhough at that moment these two disciples were not aware that it was the risen Lord, who was talking with them, what he was telling them was moving them within. The Word of God is powerful and it can stir us, even if at a particular moment all is not clear.

This story of the Walk to Emmaus would have been told over and over again before it was written down as part of the Gospel of Luke. The people who heard this story would have been reminded that the suffering and death of Jesus had been foretold in the scriptures and that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Indeed there is something dynamic about the word of God. On more than one occasion I have heard people remark on something that they heard in church as a child, or something that sister taught them at school. It is years later that the teaching makes sense.

On the way to Emmaus the risen Lord allowed the two disciples to share their story. He then reframed their story, he opened their eyes. That is the nature of faith. If you are like me then at times in your life you have expected God to answer your prayer in a particular way, or to rescue you from an awkward situation that you got yourself into, or you expected a situation to turn out differently. And at times if you are like me then you may have felt downright disappointed in God.

These times of disappointment provide an opportunity for reframing. We can be challenged to let go of our expectations. God is still God, and God is still accessible to us. The challenge to us who are followers of Christ is to let God be God.

When we come to church, particularly on Sundays when we have holy communion we are doing something similar to what occurred on the way to Emmaus. We hear the stories about God the Father and Jesus from the readings. We try to make sense of those stories and how they relate to our lives, hopefully with the assistance of the homily. The gospel reading on a particular Sunday may be one that we have heard before. But on this particular Sunday it is like we have heard it for the first time. The word of God is alive and speaks to us at that moment.

And then we have holy communion together. It is communion because we eat together, in memory of Jesus. We celebrate his presence among us. Our sharing of bread and wine is a sharing of our common union as sons and daughters of God.

Meeting here today we belong to the period in the church's history following the ascension. As St Paul said when writing to the Corinthians: Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Let us pray:

Risen Lord, we praise you and thank you that you make yourself available to us through your word and the sacrament of Holy Communion. May we respond to your call by letting go of what we want and listening and obeying what you call us to be. Amen.