

### **Sermon Easter 3 Year A 2020**

The gospel set before us on this third Sunday of Easter comes from the last chapter of Luke and what we might properly understand as the climax of this entire gospel. This story of the Road to Emmaus really is Luke's masterpiece. So many of the threads, the ideas, the themes and images that have been worked through the last 24 chapters come together here. And a story so dense in meaning we can barely skim the surface now.

Like the two other key, literary signature-pieces unique to Luke – the Prodigal Son, and Good Samaritan - this is a story that centres on a journey; the road is the key motif. And it is most certainly not accidental that in this story we find mirrored what occurs in every celebration of the Eucharist: the friends and followers of Jesus on their diverse paths come together to meet the Lord, they hear and expound God's living word, they take, bless, break and share bread, and are sent out into the world to proclaim the good news. The four-fold movement in the story of gathering, listening, sharing and sending is the exact same shape of the mass for 2000 years, and even as we celebrate it today.

But amongst these closing verses of Luke's Gospel, we hear something of the unsettled, unstable environment the disciples found themselves in following the Resurrection. In this context of confusion and uncertainty Cleopas and the unnamed disciple continue a pattern repeated for other disciples: they flee! And this story - set on the evening of Easter Day - immediately follows the account of the Resurrection, of the women encountering the angelic messengers at the tomb, and of Peter himself running to find the empty tomb. It is *'these things'* the two disciples on the road are discussing when Jesus comes along-side them and asks what they are discussing. And they give Jesus their account of his ministry, his passion and now the reports of the empty tomb. The two are trying to make sense of it all – to offer their interpretation - but they are *sad/downcast*. In other words, it is for them an unhappy story, a story without hope.

For their interpretation Jesus gives a severe reproof: *'You foolish men. Slow to believe the full message of the prophets!'* Yes, they know the stories; yes, they have shared something of the life and ministry of Jesus; yes, they were witnesses to Jesus' disgrace and death; and yes, they had even heard accounts of the resurrection. But it wasn't enough! These things did not give them the full picture. Without Christ putting their story in a much bigger story, they get it wrong. Without Christ offering his definitive word, their interpretation remains defective.

They cannot understand either Jesus' life or the events that have unfolded in Jerusalem unless Christ is allowed to come along side them and interpret it for them. *It is Jesus' self-revelation* to the disciples that brings them from error to truth, from ignorance to insight.

This a great lesson for the church. We remain in ignorance, unable to understand who Jesus is, and what his life and ministry is all about, what his death and resurrection is all about, if we ignore Christ's own words about these matters. Whatever path we endeavour to tread is in vain if Christ is absent. It is surely the great failure of the church in modern times to imagine that it is the world and *its* agenda, *its* interpretations, *its* word that determines the shape and direction of the church's faith and life. Or indeed, *our* agenda, our voice, our interpretation. The gospel today highlights how foolish and fruitless that endeavour is. The secret to the church's life is simply *humble reception of the word of Christ*. This the secret for all who seek to be faithful to Christ: not asserting our will, our word, our agenda, but Christ's. The posture of the faithful believer is always one of open humility: it is the posture which allows us to be led and as the story today ends, the posture which allows ourselves to be fed. What turns our situations around comes by heeding Christ's word, by allowing him to come beside us and direct us. Going off and doing our own thing and imposing our interpretations only ever leads to dead ends and disappointments.

This is a critical idea for Luke. Note the radical transformation that occurs when Jesus' own interpretation *does* take hold, when he *is* listened to, when he is welcomed and invited to share with the two disciples: he is recognised! The accounts of the empty tomb are immediately understood to be true. They realize he truly is the hope and salvation of Israel. And so, they cannot contain their joy and must run back to Jerusalem to share this good news! They return to the road which once had one meaning for them – one of dejection and hopelessness - and now has a completely different meaning - of joy and insight.

True joy comes by recognising Jesus as he truly is. The fervour, enthusiasm and power that fills the hearts of the disciples from this point on does not come from the pale imitations, the weak substitutes, the half-baked ideas that so often get passed about around about who Jesus is and what he has done. No! It comes by listening to him, by receiving from him what he offers. This is what it means to be a disciple; the disciple is the one who literally is the pupil or leaner.

As followers of the Lord Christ we seek – and only seek – to be instructed by what *he* has revealed. It is critical we hold fast to this central Christian affirmation, especially in an age which has largely abandoned objective truth, which asserts that really there is no eternal, absolute truth we can appeal to. Christian faith cannot accept that position. Christian faith cannot – if it is to be genuine - be determined by either rationalism, or sentimentality and feelings. No. The consistent record of scripture from the Old Testament right through to the end of the New is that God *reveals* - he shows - his eternal truth to us. And of this truth Jesus is the Master, the rabbi, the teacher: At the end of Matthew's gospel we hear, '*Go therefore and instruct all nations teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*' Our faith is essentially a supernatural faith centred on belief in divinely revealed truth.

This principle seen in today's Gospel - of handing on *what Jesus himself* shows and reveals of himself - becomes *the* central platform of the apostle's proclamation in the book of Acts. In the reading from Acts set before us last week we heard how the first Christians in Jerusalem were marked by four characteristics: '*persevering in the doctrine of the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread and the prayers.*' It is significant that adherence to doctrine and truth is mentioned as *the first* characteristic of the Christians. Listening to the Lord, receiving his teaching is the essential foundation of Christian life and witness.

Natural categories, explaining away the miracles, trying to understand Jesus in rationalistic and scientific categories only, overlooking the hard sayings of our Lord, substituting some parts of the Bible with others of our own making, updating our beliefs, dispensing with inconvenient commandments, seeking relevance, failing to proclaim and to live the full scope of God's self-revelation ignores and undermines the central point of today's Gospel: we recognise who Jesus is when we humbly listen to him. It is when we heed his word *on his own terms* that we can authentically proclaim his truth. Yes, this is hard! The disciples must run back to Jerusalem. Yes, with new insight and conviction. But back to the very place of danger! This is the shocking point of what it means follow Christ, to heed his call. It is not for the faint-hearted especially now that it seems everyone loves to hate the Christians. To follow Christ means listening to him and accepting his word on his own terms. Our clever ideas and cheap substitutes quickly lose their gloss. But listening to him brings joy! Our eyes are opened! Listening to him means we can turn, run out, and face any trouble. Amen.