

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter (A)**

#### ***God is around***

#### **Luke 24:13-35**

A parish priest tells this story:

I was talking to a couple who wanted to get married in church. As neither were churchgoers, I pointed out that by doing this they were inviting God to be involved in their lives in a new way. I spoke of Christ's life and teaching and tried to briefly explain the meaning of the cross and the resurrection. It didn't seem to move them much. The point at which they stirred was when I said, "Of course, if he rose from the dead then he's around now – he's here with us." The groom only just resisted the urge to check if anyone was behind the sofa. The bride went pale and admitted, "It sounds a bit spooky".

The priest comments, that just a few minutes before this, they had both announced that they believed in God. But they found the idea that this God might be around at all, most disturbing.

The Easter proclamation is that God is around – that God is at large in our world and that in the Risen Christ God is here with us and can be met and known. The story of the journey to Emmaus reflects that proclamation. It strikes me as the most beautiful and compelling of the post-resurrection stories. It's also the most natural of all those stories. There are no 'other-worldly' symbols, no angels, no brilliant light, no earthquake. There's nothing in it that would have 'spooked' our bride and groom. It's simply the story of two people meeting Jesus. Yet, it's more than a good story, for it serves a deep purpose. I'm sure that at its core there's an actual memory. But it is unhelpful to regard it as a piece of factual reporting. To do so will get us into all sorts of problems, because for all its naturalism, the story is highly symbolic and allegorical. Luke tells it in order to reflect on how his contemporaries knew Jesus, and how we might encounter him today. Perhaps, Luke is even saying, "Beware; when you least expect the Risen Lord to be with you, there he'll be." That was certainly the experience of the two disciples in the story.

During the late afternoon of Easter Day, they are plodding wearily from Jerusalem back to the village of Emmaus. They had come to know Jesus. They had followed him with expectation. They had hoped that he would be the one who would redeem Israel. But their hopes had been dashed with his death. Their dreams had been smashed into a thousand pieces. Now his promises were no more than empty words. They faced that hard form of grief: the loss of what might have been. Their feelings were further confused by reports of an empty tomb and a vision of angels. Nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Then the stranger joins them on the journey and enters into conversation with them, exploring with them the Scriptures as they continue their walk. As they talk they begin to see things in a different light and their hearts burn within them.

With the coming of evening, the three sit down to share a meal. During the course of it the stranger takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and shares it with the two friends. As Luke puts it, 'Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him.' The disappointment and despondency, the confusion and despair, are vanquished and they walk back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the others.

This may be a familiar journey to you. Easter is over and people are talking of resurrection, but it leaves us a bit cold. We haven't seen or experienced it ourselves. Like these two, we feel 'slow of heart to believe', not because we don't want to, but because we're overwhelmed by our own disappointments or doubts, or by our experiences of loss and grief.

Don't underestimate the difficulties those two grieving disciples had in recognising the one who walked with them. The reports they received of an empty tomb and angelic messages, no matter how well meaning, were simply not enough to break through difficulties of belief and the dark cloud of grief that surrounded them as they walked home to Emmaus. On occasions like this 'something more' is called for. For these two the 'something more' occurs when the rumours of the empty tomb are transformed into reality as Jesus is 'made known to them in the breaking of the bread'. This is Luke's way of talking about Eucharist. God may not be found behind the sofa, but God will be met in the breaking of the bread. This is the divine gift to the Christian community, the gift of the presence of Christ, the place and action where the Risen Lord still comes to make himself known to his own. In this, the simplest of actions, the breaking of bread, we recognise the stranger to be our risen friend. At Eucharist he comes to us and makes himself known to us in this humble and broken way. When we gather round the altar-table we bring bread and wine – we bring what we can touch, what we can feel, what we can see and taste. We do what Jesus told us to do. In doing that we know we're in touch with him whom we cannot see or touch, yet he is present.

Luke says that after they recognised him, Jesus vanished from their sight. He didn't go from their presence, but from their sight. He continues to walk with us, whether we see him and recognise him or not. This is that 'something more' – the promise of the Risen Lord in our midst. In the life of the faith community, we share in his death and rising. We proclaim again that God is at large in the world and that the Lord is risen and is with us. Alleluia!

*Alister Hendery*  
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